Opposition party organizational features, ideological orientations, and elite co-optation in electoral autocracies

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ABSTRACT
Autocrats often attempt to co-opt select opposition party leaders to remain in power. While the literature identifies co-optation of opposition party leaders as an important survival strategy of autocrats, we lack a systematic examination of why some opposition party leaders are co-opted but not others. This article argues that opposition party co-optation is shaped by both inter- and intra-party dynamics. Using a novel data set on opposition party organizations in electoral autocracies between 1970 and 2019, I show that opposition parties with high mobilizational capacity and those that devolve internal decision-making authority from the party leadership to lower cadres are less likely to be co-opted, especially when they are ideological distant from autocratic incumbents. I contend that opposition parties’ organizational characteristics and their ideological positioning in an autocratic party system significantly alter the strategic calculus of the incumbent regime and opposition party elites in deciding whether or not to cooperate with one another. Hence, autocratic incumbents’ ability to control opposition parties through co-optation is shaped not only by the commonly highlighted factors such as resource availability, institutional manipulation or repression, but also as a result of the relatively less well-understood factors such as opposition party organizational features and party positions.

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In electoral autocracies where opposition parties are allowed to compete for the national executive and the legislature, autocrats frequently seek to elicit the cooperation of select opposition party leaders to mitigate threats to their rule. They typically do so by providing opposition party leaders with access to patronage resources and making limited policy concessions. In return for these benefits, opposition party leaders are expected to refrain from genuinely challenging the regime. In countries such as Venezuela, Turkey and Russia, autocratic incumbents have
managed to entrench their rule despite unfavourable circumstances in part because
they succeeded in ensuring the support of select opposition party leaders. Research
suggests that when autocrats manage to co-opt opposition parties, they are better
able to prevent anti-regime collective action and survive in office.2

Despite the importance of opposition party co-optation for autocratic regime stab-
ility, our understanding of why some opposition parties are co-opted but not others
remains limited. Most studies treat co-optation mainly as an independent variable
to understand its implications for opposition fragmentation,3 the nature of dictatorial
concessions to opposition groups,4 mass protest,5 and regime survival.6 Studies focusing
on the drivers of co-optation are primarily concerned with explaining the incen-
tives and capabilities of autocratic incumbents to co-opt opposition elites.7

However, with the exception of a few recent insights based on a small number of
cases limited to a single region,8 little has been done to explain which opposition
parties are more likely to be co-opted by autocratic incumbents.

In this article, I highlight how internal features of opposition parties interact with
the patterns of inter-party competition in shaping the incentives and capabilities of
both autocratic incumbents and opposition party leaders to strike co-optation deals.
I demonstrate that organizationally extensive opposition parties that are characterized
by a nationwide network of permanent local branches together with entrenched ties to
prominent social organizations, and those that distribute internal decision-making
authority among various party members, are less prone to co-optation. Such organiza-
tional features reduce opposition party leaders’ incentives to seek political power
through co-optation by lowering the costs of maintaining their oppositional stance
against the regime, while constraining their ability to bargain with autocratic incum-
bents. I further argue that ideological distance between an opposition party and auto-
cratic incumbents amplifies the effect of organizational features as it increases the costs
of building an alliance on the part of both sides.

Empirically, this article provides the first party-level quantitative analysis on the
link between opposition party organizational features, ideological positions, and elite
co-optation in electoral autocracies. Using novel party-level data from Varieties of
Party Identity and Organization Dataset (V-Party)9 on organizational characteristics
and party positions of 316 opposition parties in 63 electoral autocracies between
1970 and 2019, I find empirical evidence corroborating the argument. There is
strong evidence that organizationally extensive opposition parties, and those
with dispersed decision-making structures are less prone to co-optation. Furthermore,
there is evidence of interaction effect between party organizational features and ideo-
logical positions. The negative effect of organizational extensiveness and the dispersion
of internal decision-making authority on the likelihood of co-optation is higher when
ideological distance between an opposition party and autocratic incumbents increases.
Conversely, party organizational extensiveness and the dispersion of internal decision-
making authority exacerbate the negative effect of ideological distance on the prob-
ability that an opposition party will be co-opted. The results demonstrate the import-
ance of considering both internal party features and party positions to fully
understand how opposition party co-optation works in electoral autocracies.

The key implication of this article is that opposition parties are not simply at the
mercy of autocratic institutions and strategic considerations of incumbents; rather
they are organizations with varying incentives and qualities that shape their strategies
to navigate through autocratic constraints. The study’s findings call for a greater
attention to the mechanisms by which opposition party institutions influence the dynamics of autocratic rule. Previous research overwhelmingly focuses on regime institutions to understand the incentives and capabilities of autocratic incumbents to control political opposition through co-optation. This study shows that how opposition elites are organized is also critical for understanding the conditions under which autocrats are likely to fail (succeed) in their attempts to control opponents through co-optation, thereby contributing to a nascent but growing body of research on opposition parties.10 Incorporating opposition party organizations to the comparative study of political institutions in autocratic settings can provide an important analytical leverage for the broader research agenda seeking to explain why nominally democratic institutions such as multiparty elections that are intended to perpetuate autocratic rule sometimes sow the seeds of regime change.11

1. Opposition party co-optation in electoral autocracies

Electoral autocracy has become the modal form of dictatorship in the contemporary world.12 These regimes hold regular multiparty elections for the chief executive and national assembly, and opposition parties are allowed to recruit candidates, open offices, and run campaigns. Yet, incumbents employ various strategies to skew the playing field in their own favour.13 Under electoral authoritarianism, incumbents often stack electoral commissions and courts with supporters, limit political opposition’s access to media, divert public funds for partisan use, and occasionally resort to electoral fraud. Where such institutional manipulations fall short of controlling the opposition, incumbents may employ overt repression. While these strategies can put opposition parties at a significant disadvantage, they can erode the regime legitimacy both domestically and internationally.14 Consequently, incumbents often back up institutional manipulations and repression with attempts to elicit cooperation of select opposition party leaders to maintain their control over electoral arena and consolidate their rule.15 The key is that co-optation can replace the costly use of flagrant repression and other forms of manipulation.

Opposition party co-optation entails party leaders’ alignment with the incumbent government, which often takes the form of collaboration between opposition party leaders and autocratic regime elites across electoral, legislative, and executive arenas. Autocrats typically co-opt opposition party leaders by providing them with financial benefits, access to patronage resources such as ministerial and legislative posts, or by making limited policy concessions. In return, co-opted opposition leaders generally cooperate with autocratic incumbents by supporting their policy initiatives or re-election bids. Examples of opposition party co-optation include A Just Russia (SR) that supported the Russian President Medvedev’s policy initiatives during the 2007–2011 parliamentary term, or the National Union for Democracy and Progress’s (UNDP) leader Bello Bouba’s appointment to the cabinet in 1997 by the Cameroonian President Biya. Although previous research suggests that co-optation of opposition parties is critical for regime survival,16 our understanding of why autocratic incumbents co-opt some opposition parties but not others remains limited.

One strand of research focuses on the incentives and capabilities of autocrats to co-opt political opposition. The conventional wisdom holds that autocrats have greater incentives to resort to co-optation when opposition is capable of threatening regime stability.17 Research suggests that autocratic incumbents often seek to co-opt
opposition parties that have demonstrated ability to form an anti-incumbent electoral coalition with other opposition parties.\textsuperscript{18} Evidence also indicates that autocratic incumbents are more likely to resort to co-optation when their vote share declines.\textsuperscript{19}

While the threat posed by opposition parties creates incentives for co-optation, the literature also highlights several political and economic constraints limiting the incumbents’ capacity of co-optation. Arriola\textsuperscript{20} shows that regimes placing few constraints on the executive, and the availability of economic resources for patronage distribution enhance autocratic incumbents’ ability to co-opt opposition elites by appointing them to the cabinet. In a recent study, Arriola et al.\textsuperscript{21} further demonstrate that ruling party institutionalization limits the incumbents’ flexibility of co-opting opposition elites by enabling regime members to veto co-optation deals that would require them to share rents and spoils with opposition elites.

These works make important contributions, but as some studies increasingly recognize it is also important to consider the conditions under which opposition party elites are willing to accept co-optation offers by autocratic incumbents. Kelly\textsuperscript{22} highlights the importance of having financial endowments and reputation for an opposition party leader to resist co-optation and maintain its oppositional stance over time. Focusing on party organizational characteristics, Buckles\textsuperscript{23} develops a game-theoretic model demonstrating that having a large activist base discourages opposition leaders from cooperating with incumbents given the party activists’ incentives to replace the co-opted leader with an alternative leader.

I contribute to this literature by focusing on additional opposition party organizational attributes such as network of local branches, ties to social organizations, and the dispersion of decision-making authority, and by discussing how internal party features interact with party ideological positions in driving patterns of opposition co-optation. Moreover, I present the first party-level quantitative examination of the relationship between opposition party features and co-optation.

2. Party organizations, ideological proximity, and co-optation

2.1. Potential benefits and risks of co-optation for autocrats and opposition elites

Autocrats strive to balance the benefits of co-opting an opposition party against the costs. On the positive side, co-optation can help autocrats avoid the costly use of blatant repression and institutional manipulation. Autocrats can manipulate institutions and use coercion to secure power, but the more they employ such strategies, the greater the risk of opposition backlash.\textsuperscript{24} Yet, with too little coercion and manipulation they can be overthrown. Co-optation can solve the dilemma by expanding the regime’s support base and preventing anti-regime collective action, which together diminish the need for overt repression and manipulation. By selectively targeting some opposition parties while excluding others, autocrats can exacerbate coordination problems within the opposition.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, ensuring the cooperation of select opposition parties can help incumbents secure legislative majorities and bolster their credibility in the eyes of political opposition.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, autocrats can ultimately neutralize potential threats to their rule and prolong their tenure in office by co-opting opposition parties.

However, on the negative side, co-optation often involves policy concessions and the distribution of patronage resources to opposition elites. Channelling such
benefits to political opposition often comes at the expense of a larger distribution of spoils among the members of the ruling coalition whose support is critical for the incumbent leader.\textsuperscript{27} When autocrats decide to co-opt opposition elites, they risk alienating regime elites, especially the hardliner factions that typically strongly oppose sharing power and spoils with opposition elites. Moreover, in electoral autocracies incumbents value their vote shares. Maintaining their dominance in the electoral arena through large vote margins help them portray an image of invincibility, and preserve legislative majorities required to amend constitutional rules as they wish.\textsuperscript{28} Hence, autocratic incumbents should also carefully consider the views of voters and ensure that co-opting a rival party would not turn the voters away from the regime.

Given these considerations even autocratic incumbents with ample resources face limitations with regards to the extent of resources they can distribute to opposition party elites. As a result, they must act strategically and seek cooperation of opposition party leaders selectively. One solution is to employ a divide and conquer strategy by selectively targeting some parties but not others.\textsuperscript{29} Autocrats often resort to co-optation when faced with political opposition capable to threaten regime stability.\textsuperscript{30} Drawing on this logic, we should expect incumbents to seek the cooperation of parties that can credibly threaten the regime without wasting valuable resources for those that do not pose a significant threat. Moreover, autocrats can further make the most out of available resources by targeting opposition parties that regime elites and voters see favourably, at least relative to other opposition parties.

Opposition party elites also need to assess the potential benefits and costs of aligning with autocratic incumbents. On the one hand, forging an alliance with the regime can provide opposition party elites with material benefits, access to political power, and protection from repression. Moreover, opposition party elites can channel the spoils of office to supporters, and build up their reputation in the eyes of constituencies that see the opposition as illegitimate or unsuited to govern.\textsuperscript{31} On the other hand, co-optation can alienate party activists and threaten the leader’s political survival by triggering internal dissent.\textsuperscript{32} For example, Turkey’s Nationalist Action Party (MHP) experienced internal rebellion and defections following its leader’s decision to align with the Erdogan regime.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, proximate benefits that opposition party leaders could reap from co-optation may come at the expense of broader political reforms and material benefits they could gain in the future by mobilizing against the regime. For example, opposition parties such as the Movement of Socialist Democrats (MDS) and the Popular Unity Party (PUP) that were loyal to the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia were largely discredited and had little leverage over the design of subsequent democratic institutions in the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution.

\section*{2.2. How party organizational features and party positions drive patterns of co-optation in autocracies}

The argument centres on three party-level factors that shape how autocratic incumbents and opposition party leaders assess the potential benefits and costs of co-optation: (1) organizational extensiveness of an opposition party, involving a nationwide network of active local branches and ties to social organizations;\textsuperscript{34} (2) the dispersion of internal decision-making authority within an opposition party; (3) and ideological positioning of the incumbent regime and an opposition party.
Opposition parties vary in their capacity to challenge the regime at the ballot box and beyond, as a function of organizational extensiveness. Party organizational extensiveness plays a fundamental role in shaping opposition elites’ incentives to align with autocratic incumbents. The boots on the ground provided by local branches enhance the party’s capacity to mobilize voters, and help maintain linkages to local party members and constituents overtime. Especially where local organizational presence is amplified by the ties to prominent social organizations, the opposition party’s ability to disseminate its messages and cultivate partisan ties among voters is significantly enhanced. Permanent grassroots presence with the aid of local branches and affiliated social organizations is especially critical in autocratic settings because opposition elites usually have limited access to media, and government censorship hinders their ability to communicate with voters and their membership base. Hence, opposition parties with an organized presence on the ground can pose a significant electoral threat to the regime, which provides party leaders with alternative means to push for political concessions and achieve political power. Armed with an extensive party organization, opposition leaders should be less inclined to make costly compromises on their anti-regime stance in exchange for the potential benefits of co-optation.

Moreover, organizational extensiveness increases the ability of party leaders to compete against the regime beyond the electoral arena. Post-electoral power struggles between opposition parties and incumbents often play a critical role in gradual regime openings and democratic breakthroughs. Given their enhanced mobilizational capacity, organizationally extensive parties have the ability to pose a credible threat of post-electoral revolt, which raises the costs of repression and manipulation on the part of autocratic incumbents. Consequently, opposition party leaders with extensive organizations face lower costs of remaining in the opposition camp, and thus have relatively fewer incentives to be co-opted than leaders with less extensive organizations.

From the incumbents’ perspective, organizationally extensive opposition parties are more valuable to co-opt because they are more threatening to regime stability. Co-opting such parties helps incumbents to play the game of multipartyism without facing the necessity of employing excessively manipulative strategies to remain in power. However, as Buckles demonstrates opposition parties with a large activist base are likely to demand greater concessions than incumbents are willing to make. When opposition parties have a nationwide organizational infrastructure in the form of local branches and/or ties to prominent social organizations, they are better able to penetrate into constituencies across the nation and mobilize their members and activist base against the incumbent regime. These features further encourage opposition party elites to demand more from incumbents in exchange for their collaboration. However, given that incumbents often have finite resources available to distribute to opposition elites, their ability to co-opt organizationally extensive opposition parties tends to be limited.

**Hypothesis 1:** Greater party organizational extensiveness is associated with a lower likelihood that an opposition party will be co-opted by the regime.

How opposition party leaders and autocratic incumbents assess the potential benefits and risks of striking a co-optation deal is also shaped by the distribution of power within the opposition party. Party organizations vary in the degree to which decision-making authority over important aspects of party policy (e.g. candidate
selection, campaign strategies etc.) is concentrated in the hands of an individual party leader, a small circle of elites, or dispersed among various members organized at different layers within the organization. The nature of internal decision-making procedures has important implications for parties’ behaviour and goals. Party organizations in which the authority is highly concentrated, party leaders enjoy a greater degree of autonomy and discretion over party strategies. In contrast, the devolution of power to other party elites or lower cadres requires party leaders to seek the approval of various internal veto players before committing to a particular strategy.

Opposition party leaders with greater discretion over party strategies should be more likely to be co-opted than those who need the approval of various internal veto players to strike a deal with incumbents. The literature on coalition formation in democracies demonstrates that when decision-making procedures enable party members to influence party strategies, party leaders’ ability to bargain with potential coalition partners is substantially diminished. Similarly, the presence of greater internal constraints on the party leader’s decision-making authority should limit the leader’s ability to make concessions to the regime and prolong the bargaining process. The decision to align with the incumbent regime often forces party leaders to compromise on their pursuit of broader long-term political gains in exchange for short-term office benefits. Such compromises often meet with a backlash from lower cadres, which typically attach more intrinsic value to the party’s confrontational stance against the regime. Party leaders can ignore internal demands but doing so puts their hold on leadership at risk, especially when a rival party elite decide to challenge the party leader. Constraints on the party leader stem partly from decentralized leadership selection procedures that enhance the ability of party members to hold the leader accountable. Parties that lack such mechanisms of internal accountability impose fewer constraints on the leaders’ ability to make concessions to the regime, reducing the potential costs of co-optation on the part of party leaders.

Autocratic incumbents’ ability to co-opt opposition parties with dispersed decision-making procedures is also limited because party leaders with incentives to seek the backing of various party members should be more likely to demand higher concessions from the regime. Party leaders may promise to distribute more spoils and rents to party members, but this requires them to push for more expansive deals that are costly for the regime. The demands of party leaders from the regime should increase in parallel to the proportion of party members acting as veto players. Hence, the more dispersed the decision-making authority, the harder it becomes for autocratic incumbents to co-opt the party.

**Hypothesis 2:** Greater dispersion of intra-party decision-making authority is associated with a lower likelihood that a party will be co-opted by the regime.

The impact of organizational extensiveness and the dispersion of decision-making authority should be moderated by the ideological distance between an opposition party and autocratic incumbents. In autocratic party systems, party competition is often two-dimensional. On one dimension, parties usually compete over policy related cleavages such as broader economic conditions or more specific policy areas including, for example, welfare provision, religion in public domain, and the role of the state in the economy. In addition to the policy dimension, the question of regime change is often the most important competitive dimension on which parties are positioned. In some autocratic party systems such as Turkey, Venezuela, and
Mexico (pre-2000) both dimensions are salient, whereas in other party systems parties have discernible differences in terms of their positions on the regime dimension but not on the policy dimension. I expect the degree to which opposition parties and autocratic incumbents differ in their positioning along the two dimensions to further alter the incentives and capabilities of both sides to forge co-optation deals.

Ideological considerations should play a major role in autocrats’ decision to make a co-optation offer to a particular opposition party, and influence whether their co-optation attempt will succeed. When there is no discernible ideological difference between parties, both sides face fewer constraints when building an alliance. For one, ideological distance exacerbates the costs of co-opting an opposition party on the part of autocratic incumbents due to heightened risk of discontent among ruling elites and the regime’s core constituencies. Hardliner internal factions and core constituencies are particularly likely to oppose sharing spoils and rents with an ideologically distant opposition party. In such contexts, autocrats tend to be reluctant to attempt to co-opt the opposition party. When the ideologically distant party has an extensive organization, autocratic incumbents should face especially high costs of co-optation, because organizational extensiveness already creates incentives for opposition party leaders to demand greater concessions from the regime in exchange of co-optation. Importantly, the enhanced risk of alienating a group of regime elites and core constituencies when forming an alliance with an ideologically distant opposition party constrains autocratic incumbents even when they have enough resources to meet the demands of an organizationally extensive opposition party. Hence, autocratic incumbents should have fewer incentives to attempt to co-opt parties that are both organizationally extensive and ideologically distant from them.

Further, when an opposition party has dispersed decision-making structures, and it is ideologically distant from autocratic incumbents, it should become less prone to co-optation. If party members and core supporters are ideologically motivated, they are more likely to oppose and veto the party leader’s attempt to compromise on the party’s oppositional stance. Given that dispersed decision-making procedures enhance the ability of party members to hold the leader accountable, the party leader faces a greater risk of removal from the party leadership if she deviates from the party line. As a result, the party leader is significantly constrained in bargaining with the regime, and in her ability to make concessions to strike a co-optation deal. Conversely, party organizations giving lower cadres few means to constrain the party leader, provides the party leader with fewer incentives to remain committed to the party’s ideological position. In this case, the party leader faces a lower risk of punishment by other party members, making it less costly to align with the incumbent regime despite ideological differences. The risk of experiencing internal backlash becomes higher for party leaders as the ideological distance between their party and the incumbent regime increases, and this risk should be especially pronounced when an opposition party has dispersed decision-making structures that boost the ability of party members to punish the party leader. Given the constraints opposition party elites face, autocrats’ attempts to co-opt ideologically distant parties with dispersed decision-making structures are likely to fail.

**Hypothesis 3**: Greater ideological distance between an opposition party and autocratic incumbents is associated with a lower likelihood that an opposition party will be co-opted.
Hypothesis 4: The greater the ideological distance between an opposition party and autocratic incumbents, the stronger the negative association between opposition party organizational extensiveness and the likelihood of co-optation.

Hypothesis 5: The greater the ideological distance between an opposition party and autocratic incumbents, the stronger the negative association between the dispersion of internal decision-making authority and the likelihood of co-optation.

3. Research design

3.1. Sample

I examine these claims on a sample of 316 parties from 63 electoral autocracies – defined here as autocratic regimes that hold formally competitive elections for the national executive and the legislature – between 1970 and 2019. Parties are identified as opposition parties if they are legally independent from the ruling party. The data set includes repeated observations of major opposition parties (>5% of vote share) across 251 legislative election cycles, which results in a sample size of 586 party-election-year observations. The unit of analysis is a party-election-year nested in an electoral autocracy.

3.2. Dependent variable

Co-optation is a dummy variable that indicates whether an opposition party joins a pre-electoral coalition led by an autocratic incumbent (e.g. Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysia 1952 –); an opposition party member accepts a cabinet position after the election (e.g. Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS), Senegal 1992); an opposition party declares its support for the incumbent’s election bid without building a formal electoral alliance with the incumbent regime (e.g. National Convention Party (NCP), Ghana 1992); and/or if an opposition party provides parliamentary support to the incumbent government (e.g. Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), Russia 2000–). This variable is coded by crossing original expert survey data, Political Handbook of the World series (1975–2019), and cabinet data from WhoGov Dataset. The dichotomous operationalization of co-optation recognizes the fact that the four coding criteria are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A party is coded as co-opted at a party-election-year if any of the aforementioned conditions hold in subsequent years until the next party-election-year. In total, the data set includes 233 events of co-optation. Appendix Sections 3–4 provide more information about the operationalization of co-optation and display the full list of party-election-year observations with co-optation.

Figure 1 displays the patterns of opposition party co-optation between 1970 and 2019. The vertical axis shows the per cent of party-election-year observations with co-optation over five/seven-year intervals (horizontal axis). The figure demonstrates that co-optation of opposition parties has been prevalent in electoral autocracies, and that there is a clear uptrend since 1970. Opposition party co-optation has become more frequent since the 1990s when many autocracies in sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia introduced multiparty elections. This is in line with the notion that the transition to multiparty politics in these regions
have resulted in increasing attempts by incumbents to control opposition party elites through co-optation.\textsuperscript{52}

### 3.3. Main independent variables: measuring party organizational features and ideological positions

The argument posits that co-optation is a function of internal features of opposition parties and their ideological proximity to the incumbent regime. I use expert survey data collected as part of the V-Party project.\textsuperscript{53} V-Party is the most comprehensive data set on party organizations and party stances to date, allowing this study to present the first cross-country party-level quantitative investigation of the relationship between opposition party features and co-optation. The appendix presents the exact wording of the relevant expert survey questions.

The first part of the argument suggests that organizationally extensive opposition parties are less prone to co-optation. I operationalize organizational extensiveness by building an index composed of three interrelated indicators. The first indicator measures the extent to which a party has a nationwide territorial organization in the form of permanent local branches at the municipal level. The second indicator focuses on the scope of a party’s local reach by measuring the degree to which party activists and personnel have an active presence across local communities during and outside the election season. Finally, the third indicator measures the strength of a party’s ties to prominent social organizations (i.e. labour unions, religious organizations, etc.). The three highly correlated indicators are standardized and summed together to build the composite index of organizational extensiveness, where higher scores indicate greater extensiveness.

To measure the dispersion of internal decision-making authority, I construct an index using two indicators. The first indicator captures the devolution of decision-making authority over the nomination of the party candidates for legislative elections.

![Figure 1. Per cent of party-year observations with co-optation between 1970 and 2019.](image-url)
Higher values on this indicator denote that a party leader has relatively less discretion over the nomination of the party’s legislative candidates, and thus nomination processes are characterized by collegial decision-making procedures incorporating the interests of other party members. The second indicator measures party personalization, which is higher for parties that primarily operate as an instrument to further individual ambitions of a party leader rather than representing the interests of a broader party organization. At extremes, personalized parties are those that provide individual party leaders with full autonomy from other party members in that party leaders face few effective constraints in setting up party strategies. At the opposite end of the spectrum, non-personalized parties are known with collegial decision-making procedures where other party members have more voice in shaping party operations. The two indicators are standardized and summed together to build the composite index of dispersion of internal decision-making authority. Higher scores on the index indicate increasing dispersion of internal decision-making authority within a party organization.

To measure parties’ ideological orientations, I utilize two indicators from the V-Party expert survey. The first indicator relates to a party’s overall ideological stance on economic issues and captures its position on the left-right scale. I rescaled the indicator to 0–1 through the normal cumulative distribution function, and then calculated the absolute distance between an opposition party and the incumbent party. In contexts where the economic policy cleavage is not salient there is not much observable difference between individual parties, and thus the absolute distance between parties is close to zero.

The second indicator of ideological positions measures the competition over the question of regime change that is often the most important competitive dimension on which parties are located in autocratic party systems. The measure captures the extent to which the leadership of a party is committed to democratic principles such as free and fair multiparty elections, freedom of speech, media, assembly and association. At one end of the spectrum, a party follows what Greene calls regime-mobilizing strategy by promoting itself as a party of democratic reform. At the other end of the spectrum, a party openly supports the maintenance of the autocratic form of government. This indicator is also rescaled to 0–1 using the normal cumulative distribution function. I then calculated the absolute distance between an opposition party and the incumbent party.

I standardized and combined the two indicators to create a unified measure of ideological distance between an opposition party and the incumbent party. Accordingly, parties that have highly divergent positions on both dimensions score especially high in terms of ideological distance, whereas parties that are located closer to one another on both dimensions score particularly low in terms of ideological distance. Appendix Section 5 displays substantial variation in party positions, and presents correlation matrix of the main independent variables.

3.4. Model specification

I estimate a series of hierarchical logistic models to account for the relationship between party organizational features, party positions, and the likelihood of co-optation. I fit random intercepts logit models, allowing intercepts to vary by party and country, so that the within-group residuals become conditionally independent and
identically distributed. The models incorporate estimated group-level variance components, which would otherwise remain in the error term and result in regressor-error dependency.56

I control for several potential party-level confounding variables. First, the past instances of co-optation may affect organizational features, ideological positions, and the likelihood of co-optation. Accordingly, I control for the number of times a party was co-opted in the past. Controlling for the past instances of co-optation should account for latent factors that make parties previously co-opted by the incumbent regime systematically different from non-coopted parties in ways that are related to party organizational features and ideological stances. Moreover, I add a dummy variable indicating whether a party mainly derives its support from a particular ethnic and/or regional group. I also include a dummy variable for religious parties that often have extensive organizations and dispersed decision-making structures.57 The data on ethnic–regional and religious parties are collected through the V-Party expert survey.

I also control for several variables that are related to the broader competitive environment. These variables account for the possibility that opposition co-optation is driven by incumbents’ access to economic resources, socioeconomic context, and institutional framework. The availability of natural resources should enhance incumbents’ ability to buy off opposition party elites as well as voters. This can in turn make it harder for opposition elites to build socially rooted, organizationally extensive parties. I therefore control for the availability of natural resources using data on oil production per capita.58 Moreover, in economically developed countries, opposition groups may be more willing to forego material benefits associated with co-optation,59 which is likely to create incentives for opposition party leaders to maintain their oppositional stance. Therefore, I control for the level of economic development with a measure of GDP per capita from the Maddison Project.60

Previous research demonstrates that presidential systems are associated with party organizational weakness and centralization.61 Moreover, in presidential regimes autocrats face few executive constraints that can hinder their ability to co-opt opposition elites. Accordingly, the models include a dummy variable for (semi) presidential systems (the reference category is parliamentary system).62 Finally, regimes that are highly repressive and hold excessively manipulated elections can raise the costs of investing in party organizations and adopting ideologically distant positions from incumbents on the part of opposition elites, making opposition parties more prone to co-optation. I control for the level of democracy using electoral democracy index from Varieties of Democracy Dataset (V-Dem).63

4. Results

Table 1 presents the results predicting opposition party co-optation. Model 1 is the baseline specification only including organizational extensiveness and the dispersion of internal decision-making authority. The coefficients for organizational extensiveness ($\beta = -0.38, p < 0.01$) and the dispersion of internal decision-making authority ($\beta = -0.80, p < 0.05$) are statistically significant and, in line with Hypotheses 1 and 2 both are negatively associated with the probability of co-optation. The results for these variables are only slightly attenuated in Model 2 that also accounts for ideological proximity of an opposition party to the incumbent regime. As expected, the coefficient estimate of ideological distance suggests that opposition parties that are ideologically
Table 1. Correlates of opposition party co-optation.

|                          | (1)    | (2)    | (3)    | (4)    | (5)    | (6)    | (7)    |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Organizational extensiveness | -0.384*** | -0.271*** | -0.277*** | -0.269*** | -0.260*** | -0.278*** | -0.257*** |
|                          | (0.104) | (0.104) | (0.078) | (0.076) | (0.073) | (0.074) | (0.074) |
| Dispersion of decision-making aut. | -0.807*** | -0.602**  | -0.599*** | -0.668*** | -0.622*** | -0.583*** | -0.628*** |
|                          | (0.281) | (0.284) | (0.212) | (0.209) | (0.202) | (0.207) | (0.204) |
| Ideological distance     | -1.530*** | -1.350*** | -1.345*** | -1.347*** | -1.328*** | -1.377*** | -1.377*** |
|                          | (0.344) | (0.258) | (0.247) | (0.242) | (0.244) | (0.278) | (0.278) |
| No. of previous co-optation | 0.762*** | 0.884*** | 1.147*** | 1.159*** | 1.154*** | 1.154*** | 1.154*** |
|                          | (0.240) | (0.245) | (0.270) | (0.272) | (0.271) | (0.271) | (0.271) |
| Ethnic-regional          | 0.352   | 0.307   | 0.273   | 0.300   | 0.419   | 0.412   | 0.413   |
|                          | (0.419) | (0.412) | (0.417) | (0.413) | (0.412) | (0.417) | (0.413) |
| Religious                | -1.094* | -1.059* | -1.164* | -1.066* | -1.062* | -1.062* | -1.062* |
|                          | (0.645) | (0.612) | (0.609) | (0.614) | (0.612) | (0.614) | (0.614) |
| Presidential             | 0.086   | 0.077   | 0.087   | 0.087   | 0.657   | 0.666   | 0.657   |
|                          | (0.657) | (0.666) | (0.657) | (0.657) | (0.657) | (0.657) | (0.657) |
| Electoral democracy      | -2.369  | -2.175  | -2.360  | -2.360  | (1.555) | (1.574) | (1.557) |
|                          | (1.555) | (1.574) | (1.557) | (1.557) | (1.557) | (1.557) | (1.557) |
| Oil production per capita (logged) | 0.166   | 0.167   | 0.166   | 0.166   | 0.118   | 0.121   | 0.118   |
|                          | (0.118) | (0.121) | (0.118) | (0.118) | (0.118) | (0.118) | (0.118) |
| GDP per capita (logged)  | -0.825** | -0.850** | -0.820** | -0.820** | -0.338** | -0.344** | -0.339** |
|                          | (0.338) | (0.344) | (0.339) | (0.339) | (0.339) | (0.339) | (0.339) |
| Organizational extensiveness X ideological distance | -0.136 | -0.058 |
|                          | (0.094) | (0.257) |
| Dispersion of decision-making aut. X ideological distance | -0.058 |
|                          | (0.257) |
| Num. obs.                | 586     | 555     | 555     | 555     | 539     | 539     | 539     |
| Num. groups: Party       | 316     | 301     | 301     | 301     | 297     | 297     | 297     |
| Num. groups: Country     | 63      | 62      | 62      | 62      | 61      | 61      | 61      |
| AIC                      | 538.532 | 465.952 | 457.622 | 458.122 | 448.452 | 448.588 | 450.422 |
| Var: Party (Intercept)   | 4.87    | 4.18    | 0.87    | 0.42    | 0.17    | 0.10    | 0.18    |
| Var: Country (Intercept) | 9.83    | 7.16    | 4.02    | 4.00    | 3.38    | 3.70    | 3.39    |

Note: Hierarchical logit models. Standard errors in parentheses. The theory predicts negative coefficient signs for organizational extensiveness, dispersion of decision-making authority, ideological distance, and interaction terms.

***p < 0.01 **p < 0.05 *p<0.1
distant from autocratic incumbents are less likely to be co-opted ($\beta = -1.53, p < 0.01$). Model 3 adds the past instances of co-optation, which is positively associated with the likelihood of co-optation, indicating that opposition parties that have more past experience of collaboration with the incumbents are especially likely to be co-opted in subsequent periods ($\beta = 0.76, p < 0.01$). In Model 3, the estimated coefficients for organizational extensiveness, the dispersion of decision-making authority, and ideological distance are similar to Model 2. The results in Models 1–3 remain unaltered in Model 4 that accounts for additional party-level factors by introducing controls for ethnic-regional and religious parties. The results suggest that whether an opposition party derives its support from a particular ethnic or regional group has no implications for the likelihood of co-optation. However, religion-based opposition parties such Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) in Malaysia are significantly less likely to be co-opted than other parties.

Models 1–4 corroborate Hypotheses 1 and 2 that suggest opposition parties with extensive organizations and those that disperse decision-making authority among various party members have a lower probability of being co-opted by autocratic incumbents. Results also lend support for Hypothesis 3 in that opposition parties that are ideological more distant from autocrats are less likely to be co-opted.

Model 5 introduces control variables such as oil production per capita, GDP per capita, presidential regimes, and the level of electoral democracy. The results are unchanged after accounting for additional controls. The point estimate for organizational extensiveness indicates that, on average, a one-unit increase in organizational extensiveness reduces the probability of co-optation by about 23 per cent ($\exp(\beta = -0.26) = 0.77$). Substantively speaking, a change in organizational extensiveness from 20th percentile (−2.22) to 80th percentile (2.15), which is about the difference between Just Russia (SR, Russia) in 2016 and National Action Party (PAN, Mexico) in 1985, reduces the probability of co-optation by around 15 per cent. Furthermore, the results suggest that, on average, a one-unit increase in the dispersion of internal decision-making authority reduces the probability of co-optation by around 47 per cent ($\exp(\beta = -0.62) = 0.53$). Moving from 20th percentile (−1.38) to 80th percentile (0.48) on the index, which is about the difference between Algerian National Front in 2017 (FNA, Algeria) and New Patriotic Party in 1996 (NPP, Ghana), decreases the probability of co-optation by about 27 per cent. Overall, the evidence suggests that opposition parties with extensive organizations and those in which decision-making procedures are dispersed among various party members are significantly less likely to be co-opted.

Models 6 and 7 evaluate Hypotheses 4 and 5 by interacting party organizational features and ideological distance. Given that the magnitude, direction, and statistical significance of the interaction terms as well as their constitutive terms can be misleading and not meaningful, Figure 2(A,C) plots the marginal effects of party organizational features at the full range of the values of ideological distance. In line with Hypothesis 3, Figure 2(A) demonstrates that with increasing levels of ideological distance, the negative marginal effect of organizational extensiveness on the probability of co-optation becomes stronger. The effect becomes statistically significant when the value of ideological distance surpasses −0.70. The underlying histogram in the plot shows that the statistically significant relationship applies to more than 62 per cent of the observations that have an ideological distance score of more than −0.70. Substantively, the coefficient estimate of organizational extensiveness becomes roughly about twice the size.
of the coefficient in Model 5 for opposition parties with an ideological distance to the incumbent regime similar to that of Tanzania’s Party for Democracy and Congress (Chadema) in 2000 or Mexico’s Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD) in 1994. In about 30 per cent of the observations where opposition parties and the incumbent regime have ideological positions relatively closer to one another, the impact of organizational extensiveness on the probability of co-optation becomes indeterminate.

Figure 2(C) plots the marginal effect of the dispersion of internal decision-making authority over the full range of the values of ideological distance. In line with Hypothesis 4, the negative marginal effect of the dispersion of internal decision-making
authority becomes stronger as the ideological distance between an opposition party and autocratic incumbents increases. The effect is statistically significant over the values of ideological distance ranging from about −0.78 to 1.01 (67 per cent of the observations). Substantively, however, the effect is only slightly altered as ideological distance increases.

Figure 2(B,D) displays the marginal effect of ideological distance across the range of values of organizational features. Figure 2(B) demonstrates that the marginal effect of ideological distance becomes substantially stronger as organizational extensiveness increases. Similarly, Figure 2(D) indicates stronger negative effect of ideological distance on the probability of co-optation as decision-making procedures within opposition parties become more dispersed. Overall, the observed associations provide evidence in support of Hypotheses 4 and 5. The effect of organizational features on co-optation is conditional on ideological distance between an opposition party and the incumbent regime. The opposite is also true as indicated by Figure 2(B,D): the effect of ideological distance is moderated by opposition party organizational features.

The findings suggest that opposition party co-optation is largely driven by party-level factors. Among country-level factors, only the level of economic development, proxied by GDP per capita, has a statistically significant relationship with the likelihood of party co-optation. The coefficient for GDP per capita suggests that parties competing in economically less developed electoral autocracies may face greater pressures and incentives to align with autocratic incumbents.

A set of robustness tests give substantially similar results. In Appendix Table 5, I run models without pre-electoral coalitions Appendix Table 6 displays results from models where opposition parties’ parliamentary support to autocratic incumbents is excluded as co-optation. Overall, the results presented in Appendix Table 5 and Table 6 are substantively similar to the main models, indicating that the findings are robust to narrower operationalizations of co-optation. These robustness checks also ensure that the results are not driven by so-called satellite parties that always provide electoral or parliamentary support to autocrats. Moreover, the main findings are not biased due to missingness and are robust to controlling for the seat share of an opposition and an incumbent party, as well as various additional variables (see Appendix Tables 8–10).

5. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that opposition party characteristics help explain patterns of co-optation in electoral autocracies. The findings suggest that organizationally extensive opposition parties, and those that distribute internal decision-making authority among various party members, are less likely to be co-opted. Party organizational extensiveness, i.e. nationwide network of active local branches, and entrenched ties to social organizations, boosts opposition party leaders’ ability to mobilize against the regime, and survive in autocratic settings, reducing their incentives to make costly compromises on their oppositional stance to the incumbent regime. Moreover, where party leaders face greater internal constraints in bargaining with autocratic incumbents due to dispersed decision-making structures, their ability to make concessions to the regime is significantly hindered, reducing the chances of striking a co-optation agreement with the incumbent regime.
The findings also suggest that as the ideological distance between an opposition party and the incumbent regime increases, the negative impact of these organizational attributes is exacerbated. The costs of establishing a co-optation agreement increases for both autocratic incumbents and opposition party leaders when an opposition party has an extensive organization, dispersed decision- making structures, and ideologically position itself distant from the incumbent regime. Thus, the findings demonstrate that opposition party organizational features and ideological positions substantially shape the ability of autocratic incumbents to co-opt a particular opposition party, regardless of the availability of patronage resources that they can distribute to opposition party leaders, or repressive tactics that they often use to discourage opposition party leaders from maintaining their anti-regime stance.

This is the first cross-national party-level quantitative study of the relationship between internal characteristics of opposition parties, their ideological orientations, and elite co-optation in electoral autocracies. While the findings contribute to the current knowledge about opposition party co-optation, the study’s data set limits our ability to empirically evaluate exact causal mechanisms by which party organizational features and ideological stances affect dynamics of co-optation. Future research should analyse specific cases to assess this article’s causal logic and its correlational findings. Nevertheless, the study’s findings promise to further our understanding of the functions and consequences of multiparty elections in autocracies. Recognizing the diversity of opposition party organizational features and their ideological orientations can further the debate on when and why multiparty elections can undermine autocratic regime stability.

Notes

1. Arriola, “Patronage and Political Stability in Africa”; Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng, "Democratic Subversion"; Buckles, "Internal Opposition Dynamics"; Gel’man, “Political Opposition in Russia”; Kelly, "Party Proliferation and Trajectories of Opposition"; Levitsky and Way, Competitive Authoritarianism; Lust-Okar, Structuring Conflict in the Arab World; Reuter and Robertson, “Legislatures, Cooptation, and Social Protest.”
2. Arriola, "Patronage and Political Stability in Africa”; Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats”; Gandhi, Political Institutions under Dictatorship; Lust-Okar, Structuring Conflict in the Arab World; Reuter and Robertson, “Legislatures, Cooptation, and Social Protest.”
3. Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng, "Democratic Subversion.”
4. Conrad, “Constrained Concessions.”
5. Lust-Okar, Structuring Conflict in the Arab World; Reuter and Robertson, “Legislatures, Cooptation, and Social Protest.”
6. Arriola, "Patronage and Political Stability in Africa”; Gandhi, Political Institutions under Dictatorship; Gandhi and Przeworski, "Authoritarian institutions and the Survival of Autocrats.”
7. Arriola, "Patronage and Political Stability in Africa”; Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng, "Democratic Subversion”; Gandhi and Przeworski, “Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships.”
8. See, for example, Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics”; Gandhi and Buckles, “Opposition Unity and Cooptation in Hybrid Regimes”; Kelly, “Party Proliferation and Trajectories of Opposition.”
9. Lührmann et al., V-Party Dataset.
10. See, for example, Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics”; Greene, Why Dominant Parties Lose; Kelly, "Party proliferation and Trajectories of Opposition"; LeBas, From Protest to Parties.
11. Bernhard, Edgell, and Lindberg, “Institutionalizing Electoral Uncertainty”; Schedler, The Politics of Uncertainty.
12. Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*.
13. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*.
14. Schedler, “The Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics.”
15. Arriola, “Patronage and Political Stability in Africa”; Arriola, DeVero, and Meng, “Democratic Subversion”; Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics”; Kelly, “Party Proliferation and Trajectories of Opposition”; Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*; Reuter and Robertson, “Legislatures, Co-optation, and Social Protest.”
16. See, for example, Arriola, “Patronage and Political Stability in Africa”; Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*; Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*.
17. Gandhi and Przeworski, “Cooperation, Co-optation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships.”
18. Gandhi and Buckles, “Opposition Unity and Co-optation in Hybrid Regimes.”
19. Arriola, DeVero, and Meng, “Democratic Subversion.”
20. Arriola, “Patronage and Political Stability in Africa.”
21. Arriola, DeVero, and Meng, “Democratic Subversion.”
22. Kelly, “Party Proliferation and Trajectories of Opposition.”
23. Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics.”
24. Schedler, “The Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics.”
25. Arriola, DeVero, and Meng, “Democratic Subversion”; Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*.
26. Resnick, “Compromise and Contestation.”
27. See Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*.
28. Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.
29. Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*.
30. Arriola, DeVero, and Meng, “Democratic Subversion”; Gandhi and Buckles, “Opposition Unity and Co-optation in Hybrid Regimes”; Gandhi and Przeworski, “Cooperation, Co-optation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships”; Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*.
31. Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Rakner and Van de Walle, “Democratization by Elections?”
32. Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics.”
33. Turkish Minute, “Another Former Deputy Resigns.” *Turkish Minute*, 2017. https://www.turkishminute.com/2017/08/23/another-former-deputy-resigns-from-mhp-to-join-akseners-new-party/.
34. Duverger, *Political Parties*; Kitschelt, *The Transformation of European Social Democracy*.
35. Levitsky et al., *Challenges of Party-building in Latin America*; Tavits, *Post-communist Democracies and Party Organization*.
36. LeBas, *From Protest to Parties*; Samuels and Zucco, “Crafting Mass Partisanship at the Grassroots.”
37. Van Dyck, “The Paradox of Adversity.”
38. LeBas, *From Protest to Parties*; Magaloni, “The Game of Electoral Fraud”; Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*.
39. Magaloni, “The Game of Electoral Fraud.”
40. Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics.”
41. Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*.
42. Strom, “The Presthus Debacle.”
43. Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics.”
44. Ibid.; Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose*; LeBas, *From Protest to Parties*.
45. Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics.”
46. Greene, “Opposition Party Strategy.”
47. I have inductively developed the hypotheses about the effects of ideological positions on co-optation to explain cases where parties with extensive organizations and dispersed decision-making structures are co-opted by autocrats (for inductive iteration see Yom, 2015).
48. For more information on the sample construction and the list of elections included in the sample please see Appendix Section 2.
49. This excludes cases where a party member accepts a cabinet position and consequently resigns or gets expelled from the party.
50. Lührmann et al., *V-Party Dataset*. Appendix Section 3 presents the exact wording of the survey question.
51. Nyrup and Bramwell, “Who Governs?”
52. Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng, “Democratic Subversion”; Gelman, “Political Opposition in Russia: A dying species?”; Rakner and Van de Walle, “Democratization by Elections?”
53. Lührmann et al., V-Party Dataset.
54. Greene, “Opposition Party Strategy.”
55. An opposition party may not be supportive of democratic form government, but it can still be in favour of regime change. As such, the measure may underestimate the distance between an opposition party and the incumbent party on the regime dimension, leading to more conservative estimates of party positions.
56. Snijders and Bosker, Multilevel Analysis.
57. See, for example, Wegner, Islamist Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes.
58. Ross and Mahdavi, “Oil and Gas Data, 1932–2014.”
59. Magaloni, Voting for Autocracy.
60. Bolt and Van Zanden, “The Maddison Project.”
61. Rakner and Van de Walle, “Democratization by elections.”
62. Wig, Hegre, and Regan, “Updated Data on Institutions and Elections.”
63. Coppedge et al., V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v10.
64. Berry, Golder, and Milton, “Improving Tests of Theories.”
65. For example, Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng, “Democratic Subversion”; Buckles, “Internal Opposition Dynamics”; Kelly, “Party Proliferation and Trajectories of Opposition.”
66. See Bernhard, Edgell, and Lindberg, “Institutionalizing Electoral Uncertainty”; Schedler, The Politics of Uncertainty.

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