Leadership succession in politics:
The democracy/autocracy divide revisited

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Abstract
Leadership succession marks a truly ubiquitous phenomenon with manifold and wide-ranging implications, which explains the major attention that issues of succession have received in the international literature. Most contributions to the field continue, however, to focus on political succession in either democratic or non-democratic regimes. This article develops an integrated perspective on key aspects of leadership succession at the level of political chief executives in democracies and autocracies. A comparative assessment across time and space reveals several features that challenge established notions, and stereotypes, of leadership succession in democratic and autocratic regimes. The empirical ambivalences identified suggest that the way leaders come to and fall from power should be made a more explicit part of conceptualisations of political regimes, and comparative evaluations of their respective democratic quality.

Keywords
autocracy, democracy, dictators, leaders, presidents, prime ministers, succession

Introduction
No regime can avoid the challenges of leadership succession indefinitely. As Dankwart A. Rustow (1964: 104) noted in his classic article, ‘the problem of political succession is implicit in the human condition: it is posed by man’s mortality and frailty’. Political or leadership succession (two terms that will be used interchangeably here) is, however, not just an empirical phenomenon found across the globe. Given the very nature of politics, issues of political succession tend to be ever-present, even in the absence of a recent or pending succession.

Since Valerie Bunce’s (1976, 1980a, 1980b, 1981) seminal work on the impact of elite succession on public policies, leadership succession has been studied as a dependent and an independent variable. The possible effects of leadership change are obviously not confined to the level of public policies or the political fate of individual leaders (although the
ways and means by which leaders come to power have been identified as a key factor shaping their standing and performance in office, see Weller, 2014: 494). The politics of leadership succession is of crucial importance to the development of political regimes more generally. While smooth successions can increase the performance, legitimacy and stability of a given regime, badly handled or failed successions can put a regime under serious pressure and even trigger its very end. The latter is true in particular for leader-centred and power-concentrating authoritarian regimes; indeed, bringing about a succession to long-standing charismatic leaders has been considered inherently problematic ever since Max Weber famously introduced the concept of ‘charismatic authority’ (Hoffmann, 2009). Yet, even in many established democracies, which are committed to routinising and ‘dedramatising’ political turnovers to the greatest possible extent, issues of leadership succession have figured prominently.

This article looks into leadership succession at the level of political chief executives, that is, presidents and prime ministers. As Paul ‘t Hart and John Uhr (2011c: 5) suggest, while leadership succession is an ubiquitous phenomenon, succession at the top of the executive branch is ‘the most dramatic succession of all’. The dramatic element that ‘t Hart and Uhr refer to flows from the power usually resting in the hands of the political chief executive. Indeed, largely irrespective of the different architectures of political systems, the political executive tends to be the relatively most powerful agent. While the notion of ‘strong leaders’ in the sense of leaders who go it alone and get their way may indeed be a myth (see Brown, 2014), the past decades have no doubt seen an increase in the power of political chief executives, both within and beyond the executive branch (see Peters et al., 2000; Peters and Helms, 2012; Poguntke and Webb, 2005).

Much work in the field has focused on how power changes hands in democratic regimes (see, for example, Bynander and ‘t Hart, 2006, 2008; Helms, 2018; Horiuchi et al., 2016; ‘t Hart, 2007; ‘t Hart and Uhr, 2011b; Worthy, 2016). More recently, this work has come to be complemented by valuable comparative assessments of successions in democratic politics and business (see, for example, Bynander and ‘t Hart, 2017; Farah et al., 2019). This article seeks to make a distinctive contribution to the comparative study of leadership succession by looking into the politics of succession in democratic and non-democratic regimes, the latter of which have to date been overwhelmingly treated as a separate species in the succession literature (see, for example, Ambrosio and Tolstrup, 2018; Brownlee, 2007; Egorov and Sonin, 2014, 2015; Frantz and Stein, 2012, 2017; Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2016). The next sections address six key aspects of leadership succession (relating to context, succession rules, and the roles and behaviour of incumbent leaders and would-be successors) from a comparative perspective. Before proceeding to this, a brief note on the more general nature of democratic and non-democratic regimes is in order.

The single most important difference between democratic and autocratic regimes, not least in terms of the politics of succession, certainly concerns the question as to whether those in power are vulnerable to electoral defeat. Scholars seeking to establish the ultimate function of genuinely democratic elections have rightly argued that ‘if an election does not make it possible to evict incumbent policymakers and bring another set of individuals to power, we would be reluctant to characterise the election as democratic’ (Powell, 2010: 228). It is in fact this more particular requirement that matters, not the act of being elected into office in the first place. As Teorell and Lindberg remind us, historically even some kings, in the Holy Roman Empire and elsewhere, were elected (Teorell and Lindberg, 2019: 68).
Also, holding elections, including those that may carry a certain risk for power holders but without being fully competitive, does not turn autocracies into democracies. Indeed, in many cases, the decision to eventually hold elections is ultimately driven by opposite motives, that is, to make alternations in power less likely. As Cox (2009: 1) has contended, ‘authoritarian rulers agree to positive levels of electoral risk primarily to gain information that reduces the risk of their violent removal from office via a coup d’etat or revolution’. Recent research further suggests that, other things being equal, older dictators are more likely to hold competitive elections, mainly in order to reduce uncertainty. ‘As a dictator ages, uncertainty over the future increases within the regime, because government insiders’ expected payoffs for supporting the incumbent decline as s/he ages’ (Tanaka, 2018: 81). This comes as an important addition to the finding that sickly or elderly leaders are generally more willing to pursue power-sharing strategies to defect credible threats to their continued hold on power than are younger and more healthy rulers (see Bueno De Mesquita and Smith, 2017: 237).

There are significantly more complex conceptualisations of democracy seeking to reach beyond mere ‘electoral democracy’. Fully fledged liberal democracies are ‘a synthesis of political freedom and political equality’ (Munck, 2016: 11), which in institutional terms incorporates political rights, civil rights and institutional arrangements designed to establish democratic accountability. Several other factors that scholars have considered indispensable extend beyond purely institutional characteristics, such as the principle that those elected are the actual key decision-makers in a given regime, or a social context conducive to turning freedom and equality from constitutional stipulations into political reality. Regimes lacking one or several of these components, temporarily or permanently, are often not outright autocracies but rather what Merkel (2004) labelled ‘defective democracies’. For all the open questions about assessing the democratic quality of different regimes fairly (see Schmitter, 2018), perceiving democracy and autocracy as two ends of a continuum, with individual regimes possibly moving in one or another direction over time, marks a more general feature of contemporary thinking about democracy.1 This comes as an invitation to empirical comparative inquiry to pay special attention to phenomena that seem to defy dichotomous categorisations – such as political succession.

The next sections discuss six different features relating to political succession in light of the international literature. The conclusion puts the key observations in context and addresses its implications for future research on leadership succession in different types of regime.

**Leadership succession in democratic and non-democratic regimes revisited**

**Successions and transitions**

Following a suggestion by ‘t Hart and Uhr (2011c: 2, 5), the more complex phenomenon of how power changes hands can be conceptually distinguished into successions, understood as ‘personnel changes in individual leadership positions’, and transitions, understood as ‘a change in the party or coalition that holds government’. To avoid confusion, it is important to note that this understanding of transition, developed in the context of studying democratic political systems, is at odds with the prevailing terminology in the democratisation literature, where ‘transition’ is usually understood to refer to the gradual
replacement of an autocratic regime by a democratised political order. By contrast, ‘t Hart and Uhr’s term denotes changes of power within the boundaries of a given regime. While the focus of this article is on successions, it seems important to look at them in relation to transitions.

Democratic successions and transitions at the level of government tend to go hand in hand with one another. In parliamentary systems, personnel changes in the position of prime minister usually reflect wider changes in the party composition of the government, and are effectively part of them. However, in many established parliamentary regimes, including those renowned for their capacity to bring about ‘wholesale alternations’ in government, such as the UK and other Westminster democracies, a significant share of newly incoming prime ministers happens to inherit the office from an incumbent from their own party between two parliamentary elections (see Helms, 2018: 4–5). By contrast, in systems with coalition government, transitions in terms of a changing party complex-ion of the government do not necessarily include leadership change at the top. If the dominant governing party stays in power after the break-up of the previous government, which marks one if not the only variant of partial alternations in government (see Otjes, 2020: 43–45), their leader may chair a new team of coalition partners. This pattern can be found in several parliamentary democracies, though few can compete with Italy’s historical track record (1948–1994) of persistent and returning leaders chairing a carousel of governing coalitions dominated by the Christian Democrats (see Verzichelli and Cotta, 2000).

In presidential democracies, distinctions between successions and transitions are more difficult to draw. Strictly speaking, a newly elected president assuming office in the absence of changes in the party complexion of the government describes a succession rather than a transition. However, the enormous number of appointments usually made in the wake of a change in the presidential office, and the huge difference that presidents and their teams tend to make even when compared with a previous administration representing the same party or coalition, tends to give many presidential successions the character of de facto transitions. Also, especially in presidential systems marked by two powerful legislative chambers, the scope of a de facto or real transition will to some extent depend on the degree of continuity and change at the level of executive-legislative relations. As the experience with divided government in the United States suggests, it makes much of a difference if the president’s party controls just one or both chambers of the legislature (see, for example, Conley, 2003).

Patterns of succession and transition tend to be fundamentally different in non-democratic regimes. For one thing, autocratic regimes are effectively defined by not allowing major transitions to happen. In autocratic contexts, major alternations in power usually mark the end of a regime, though the old regime is by no means certain to be succeeded by a more democratic regime (see Geddes et al., 2014, 2018: 211–217). In fact, of the 32 cases of autocratic breakdown identified by Del Panto for the period 2000–2015, no less than 21 transitions led to the installation of a new autocratic regime (Del Panto, 2019).

Some more particular patterns between successions and transitions can be identified. As Baturo has suggested, presidential successions in partly democratic and non-democratic regimes may become a source of regime change towards democracy. They tend to trigger elite splits and uncertainty that can lead to democratic transition, because successors are usually relatively weak and have yet to consolidate their incumbency advantage. Other things being equal, designated successors are considerably more likely to lose elections than incumbent rulers and thus presidential succession tends to increase
the chances for democratic breakthrough (Baturo, 2007: 25). That said, the ruling party’s ‘succession management’ has been identified as a major factor shaping the electoral (and related) effects of succession in its own right. Analysing some 400 elections in 60 authoritarian regimes, Zeng (2019: 20) found that ‘when the appointed second-in-command was able to take over power, decline in electoral support can be significantly mitigated’. What is more important, though, is that incumbent turnover occurs only if incumbents do not run for one reason or another (Baturo, 2007: 25). Thus, whatever else may be necessary to set transitional dynamics into motion, leadership succession generally has to precede electorally induced alternation in power and regime change. Despite their static appearance, most autocratic regimes are marked by constant processes of power-bargaining and evolving patterns of elite power-sharing (see, for example, Boix and Svolik, 2013; Magaloni, 2008; Reuter and Szakonyi, 2019; Svolik, 2009). These incremental changes are often concealed by the extended persistence of leaders at the top. While autocratic leaders persist in power, their environment tends to change, and sometimes driven by the leader’s own initiative. There are, however, major differences between different types of autocratic regimes in this respect. While in personalist regimes, much depends on the leader’s resources and skills, leadership succession in one-party dictatorships tends to reflect tectonic changes within the ruling party; it is the party that controls succession and access-to-power positions (see Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010: 127). Thus, in these contexts, party change drives succession rather than the other way round, which is remotely reminiscent of leadership change in party democracies.

Overall, autocratic successions tend to be of even greater importance in their own right than successions in democratic regimes. While successions in democracies usually represent a more limited form of power change, compared to full-scale democratic transitions (in terms of alternation in government and changing patterns of political control), successions in autocratic contexts often mark the one visible element of change in an otherwise more or less change-averse and closed environment. In some cases, such as specified above, leadership succession in partly and non-democratic regimes can be followed by more fundamental transitions, which then tend to reach beyond the boundaries of the extant regime.

There is one caveat, however: The importance of leadership succession in non-democratic contexts depends on the extent that incumbent leaders (and their successors) actually are the key decision-makers of the regime. What Merkel (2004: 41–42) has referred to as ‘the effective power to govern’ when sketching out the constitutive components of ‘embedded democracies’, can also be applied to the intra-power structure of autocratic regimes. To the extent that executive leaders in autocratic contexts are mere ‘puppet leaders’, with the real power resources lying with other actors, such as, for example, in Mexico during the first half of the 1930s (see Domínguez, 2002: 9), autocratic leadership successions obviously lack the independent importance they may otherwise have.

**Term limits**

The existence or absence of term limits that would govern the politics of succession is of notably limited value for making substantive distinctions between democratic and autocratic regimes, and the nature of leadership successions in different types of regime. Many established democratic regimes have known no term limits. This is first and foremost true for parliamentary systems. While extended premierships have occasionally led to public debates about establishing term limits for the prime minister, this has to date
nowhere materialised. Prime ministers can go on as long as their parties let them, and as long as their parties manage to garner reasonable electoral support to form a government. However, even in parliamentary democracies, successions do not normally come about all of a sudden. As ‘t Hart and Uhr (2011c: 5) emphasise, many successions are predictable, and ‘the anticipation process creates a whole dynamic of growing “lame duckness” for the incumbent’ – a term apparently consciously borrowed from the debate about presidents in presidential systems not eligible for re-election. Other things being equal, prime ministers begin to live on borrowed time as soon their party senses they might become an electoral liability, which can be well before the end of a single term.3

While term limits are widely used in presidential systems, they do not strictly mark a necessary element of presidential government. In the United States, the unchallenged archetype of presidentialism, a presidential term limit was established only by the Twenty-second Amendment, though the Roosevelt experience of three full terms and a fourth inauguration (1933–1945) obviously marked the only exception to the unwritten rule of a two-term US presidency. The events of 1940 (when Roosevelt decided to wage a third presidential campaign and was re-elected) triggered, or actually restarted, a major constitutional debate that eventually led to the constitutional amendment of 1951 (see Korzi, 2011). However, even in the United States, the ghost of a three-term presidency has continued to haunt some players and observers in Washington, DC (see, for example, Urban, 2013). In the younger and less consolidated presidential democracies, there have been inconclusive dynamics concerning the politics of term limits. While Africa has experienced a constant spread of presidential term limits over the past decades (see Posner and Young, 2018), Latin America has clearly moved towards relaxing the rules against presidential re-election once established – up to a degree, and in a way, that has come to call the democratic status of several countries concerned into question (see Landau, 2018).

Perhaps surprisingly, term limits are not completely alien to autocratic or semi-autocratic regimes; they have been considered to ‘play an important role in authoritarian power sharing’ (Ma, 2016: 61; see also Ezrow, 2019). The case of Mexico’s one-party regime marks arguably the best-known example, but also China has long been a classic case in point. It was only in 2018 that the two terms limit on the presidency was effectively abolished by Xi Jinping in what has been perceived by many as an attempt to establish a more personalist regime (see Shirk, 2018). Previously, China provided important evidence that autocratic elites may indeed be willing to accept the binding nature of term limits (see Wang and Vangeli, 2016). Still, most examples of what is often referred to as continuismo, which may take the form of avoidance, extension or removal of term limits (see Baturo, 2019), obviously relate to the world of autocratic regimes. The underlying forces giving rise to more particular patterns are immensely complex. Recent comparative research suggests that it is not simply structural factors, such as the tenure rule on entry or the level of democracy, which drive variation in term limit adherence. Rather, this research shows that what matters primarily for term limits to be respected is the existence of robust competition and perceptions of members of the ruling party that one or more opposition parties have the potential to replace the incumbent party (McKie, 2019: 1528).

Importantly, formally adhering to term limits does not preclude successful attempts at circumventing this particular check on presidential power that feature in the category of ‘avoidance’ in Baturo’s (2019: 79–82) typology of variations of continuismo. Russia’s Vladimir Putin is a particularly glaring case in point: Putin held the post of prime minister from 1999 to 2000 and was president between 2000 and 2008, before returning to the
office of prime minister in 2008 to regain eligibility for the presidential office, which he re-assumed in 2012. After winning re-election to presidential office in 2018, he is currently in his fourth presidential term. Putinism is, however, not just about an extraordinary political personality but also the inherent weakness of political institutions in hybrid regimes, and the redefinition of institutional power by personally powerful actors. As Steven Fish (2017: 70) has suggested, ‘if Putin chose to become minister of transport, the minister of transport would rule Russia’.

**Incumbency advantage and longevity**

Most political leaders share a strong commitment to hold on to power as long as they possibly can, but this generally applies even more to dictators than for democratic leaders. Some parliamentary democracies have experienced extremely extended tenures of heads of government (such as Luxembourg’s Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies or German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who all served for more than 15 years). Yet, the list of the longest-ruling national leaders is entirely composed of power holders in autocratic regimes. Some of them have reached tenures of 30 years, and more.

One of the most apparent regime-related reasons for this may be seen in the fact that there is effectively no life after politics for most leaders in autocratic regimes (see Baturo, 2017). For dictators not dying in office (either from natural causes or as the result of a successful assassination attempt), imprisonment or exile in the aftermath of a coup are the most typical forms of authoritarian political afterlife. There are, however, major differences between different types of autocracy. Other things being equal, authoritarian leaders in regimes with an institutionalised set of succession rules (see below) are considerably less subject to exile, imprisonment or execution. As Escribá-Folch (2013: 160) contends, ‘personalist leaders are more likely to be killed and to go into exile upon their exit than other autocrats. Military and personalist leaders are also more likely to be imprisoned than monarchs or rulers of single-party regimes’. However, escaping punishment is clearly not the same as enjoying a second career in or outside politics.

While the prospects on leaving office for democratic leaders have not been particularly attractive either for most of the past, they could count on leading a safe and secure, if possibly somewhat uneventful, afterlife as ‘elder statesmen’. Recent developments have put the difference in elite patterns in autocratic and democratic regimes into sharper relief. Many former democratic leaders now enjoy glorious afterlives, which makes it easier for incumbent leaders to step down from a powerful and prestigious electoral office (see, for example, Theakston and De Vries, 2012). It has even been suspected that some political power holders may (mis)use their political status while in office for preparing their ‘new life’ in business (see Musella, 2018: ch. 5). Admittedly, the true motives driving individual political leaders are extremely difficult to uncover, and the overall increase in the number of political leaders exiting into business has remained notably modest, at least until recently (Baturo and Mikhaylov, 2016: 342). However, there is no denying that contemporary democratic leaders in many parts of the world are considerably younger than their peers from previous generations, which provides them with unprecedented opportunities for a second career outside politics. There are still no comparable post-executive career opportunities in authoritarian contexts (Musella, in press).

If authoritarian rulers face significantly less favourable post-political career options than their democratic counterparts, the incumbency advantage, which exists to varying
degrees in many established democracies as well, is far more extreme than in most democratic contexts. Incumbent power wielders in authoritarian regimes can prevent credible challengers from running, organise fraud, or even physically eliminate their most powerful opponents (Egorov and Sonin, 2014). These are obviously not options available to any democratic leader. Still, sitting presidents and prime ministers seeking re-election have traditionally enjoyed special resources in terms of visibility and authority that proved difficult to match by challengers from the opposition. While the personalisation of politics concerns both government and opposition elites, the internationalisation of politics and the rise of international summity have benefitted political chief executives significantly more than even the most prominent opposition leaders (see Helms, 2008: 42). The incumbency advantage as we knew it seems, however, to be on the retreat in many of the established democracies – not just in the United Kingdom where the introduction of fixed parliamentary terms in 2011 abolished the long-standing re-election advantage for prime ministers and their parties (see Schleiter and Belu, 2018). In the age of ‘celebrity politics’, the pool of contenders includes celebrities from various backgrounds who enjoy a ‘quasi-incumbency advantage’ due to their public status reaching out for political top offices (Risoleo, 2018). Some of the most stunning examples relate to real amateurs winning high political office virtually overnight, such as Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, a former television comedian (see Walker, 2019). To many scholars, the category of ‘celebrities’ is, however, not strictly reserved to non-politicians; they include celebrity politicians using particular populist techniques when seeking elected office (see, for example, Street, 2004; Wood et al., 2016). Barack Obama has been considered a show case of that second type of celebrity (Wheeler, 2012: 415–419).

This has created a set of new challenges that accentuate the growing difference between the incumbency-related status of democratic and authoritarian leaders. While incumbent democratic leaders – facing new types of challengers, ever-tougher public standards of integrity and mass media that hold them ‘personally accountable’ for whatever may happen – seem to be more vulnerable than ever (see Webb et al., 2012: 81; Helms, 2012: 660), there are few, if any, signs that contemporary autocratic leaders are generally less secure in power than dictators of a previous age. Indeed, recent related research suggests that the increase in internationalisation, and the signing of bilateral investment treaties more specifically, tends to have significant positive effects in terms of leader survival in autocratic regimes, but not in democratic regimes (Arias et al., 2018).6

**Institutionalisation and openness**

The question of how institutionalised, and open to new contenders, successions are in different types of regime strikes at the very core of democratic and non-democratic government. There is, however, a great amount of structural variation in this regard even within the respective families of democratic and non-democratic regimes.

In presidential democracies, the successor question is genuinely open as soon as an incumbent reaches the maximum term limit or decides not to seek re-election (ignoring the fact that candidates in most countries need very considerable financial and other resources to make a hopeful bid). There is normally no such thing as a ‘logical successor’ to an outgoing president, even if the president’s party looks likely to extend its hold on the presidency. In the United States, the complex system of primaries, and the increase in the number of candidates, make it now virtually impossible to forecast who the two parties’ final contenders will be well until after the beginning of the election year. Yet even in the
The absence of primaries, the institutional features of presidential systems do not tend to produce ‘natural successors’. Especially the vice-presidency is neither in theory nor in practice a natural springboard to the presidency (except if the president resigns or dies in office). The presidency of George Bush Sr. marks the only post-1945 case of a former vice-president directly advancing to the presidency out of a successful presidential campaign. Strictly speaking, the office of vice-president cannot be considered a constitutive feature of presidential government at all. Quite a few Latin American presidential regimes abolished the office (e.g. Chile as early as 1833, Mexico in 1917, Columbia in 1905, re-establishing the office in 1994, or Bolivia in 1952, re-establishing the office in 1967). Also, in these and other countries of the region, the office of vice-president has recurrently been left vacant. Vice-presidents turning presidents after a successful presidential campaign, such as Bolivia’s Hernán Siles Zuazo, are as rare in Latin America as they are in the United States. Vice-presidents inheriting the presidential office who then manage to defend their position in the next presidential election, such as Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela in 2013, have also remained extremely rare. More frequently, vice-presidents have inherited the office from the incumbent president only for the rest of the term.

The post of deputy prime minister in parliamentary systems is rarely a safer bet than that of the vice-presidency in presidential systems when it comes to identifying the most likely successor to a prime minister leaving office before the end of the legislative term. This is true not only for countries with coalition governments where the position of deputy head of government is usually held by a senior figure from the smaller coalition party. Even in countries with an established tradition of single-party government, if an official position of deputy prime minister exists at all, ‘takeover prime ministers’ (Worthy, 2016) rarely move in from that post. Still, in other regards, the successor question in parliamentary systems is considerably less open than in presidential (and semi-presidential) democracies. Candidates are expected to have demonstrated their fitness for the highest office by an extended career in politics. Generally, the so-called ‘great offices of state’ (Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Finance) provide the best chances for advancement to the top. As already pointed out above, it is the parties that decide the fate of both incumbent and would-be leaders. The power of the parties in this regard is greatest in parliamentary regimes that expect, or actually require, prime ministers to be the official leader of their respective party. Here, candidates have to win the party leadership to become the prime minister, and to defend it against intra-party challengers to stay on as the prime minister. The most pronounced cases can be found in the Anglo-Saxon Westminster-type parliamentary democracies (see Cross and Blais, 2012). In most other parliamentary systems, holding the party leadership marks no formal prerequisite for becoming head of government. Still, even in those parliamentary systems in which holding the party leadership is not formally required, there is no way of winning or keeping office against the parties’ will, and most heads of government are also a party leader. Even technocrats in the office of prime minister need the tacit support of the parties, both for winning and keeping the office (see Costa Pinto et al., 2018).

Autocratic regimes differ no less strongly from one another with regard to the institutionalisation of leadership successions than do different types of democratic regime. Overall, successions in monarchic and party dictatorships are much more institutionalised and orderly than those in military regimes and personalist dictatorships (see Frantz and Stein, 2012: 299–303). As Baturo suggests, even Xi Jinping’s way to break with the regularised succession principle in 2018 is in line with this more general contention. ‘His decision to formally extend term limits for the presidential office . . . may even
be interpreted as a paradoxical reflection of regime institutionalization, the impetus to formalize the de facto power relations and avoid exerting influence informally, so that by the end of 2018, the Chinese regime was even more institutionalised than it was in the 1980s (Baturo, in press). Importantly, even in autocratic contexts, an advanced level of institutionalisation often means not only less contingency, but possibly also more openness and choice. As Frantz and Stein (2012: 301) have contended, in single-party regimes, ‘the mechanisms in place for leadership succession frequently take on democratic characteristics internally within the party; elites (and occasionally even lower level party members) can vote old leaders out and new leaders into office’.

Hereditary regimes are by their very nature characterised by a structurally limited flexibility in terms of personnel affairs. Historically, hereditary succession was ‘invented’ as it carried apparent benefits in terms of stability and legitimacy (see Kokkonen and Sundell, 2014; see also Sellin, 2018: 44–45).8 The number of possible contenders is more or less predetermined by their status within the given birth order. Modifying the line of succession (e.g. reasons of illness or perceived incapability) proved a critical and dangerous juncture even in the earliest forms of hereditary rule. As Samuel Finer (1997: 752) noted, succession indeed marked ‘the weak spot in all monarchies not adhering strictly to the rule of primogeniture’. It therefore formed a core interest of any hereditary regime to avoid any fuss about the legitimacy of particular heirs that could possibly damage the carefully constructed idea of a natural, or divine, succession order.

Some contemporary autocratic regimes display a remarkable structural affinity with these pre-democratic forms of government. Rather than simply involving family members, dictators in personalist autocracies have evinced a more particular inclination to bring in their sons as their successor. While the concrete motives for doing so may differ from case to case, possibly involving emotional bonds and/or the desire to prolong one’s own legacy, there is at least one other reason at work, as comparative research on autocratic succession suggests. If nothing else, sons are significantly less likely than other would-be successors to hasten the succession through assassination or coup attempts (Brownlee, 2007: 595).

Overall, institutions designed to shape successions are not at all alien to autocratic regimes. Interestingly, however, while institutionalised succession orders, to the extent they exist, have apparent benefits not just for the overall stability of the regime but also for the security of incumbent rulers, there are still hidden incentives for would-be successors to disregard those rules and to use revolutionary means instead to win power. Sudduth and Bell (2018: 145) demonstrate that ‘leaders that gain power through, for example, successful rebellions, popular uprisings, and major regime-changing coups, deter subsequent challenges. They are substantially less likely to be ousted than leaders who take power in ways – such as via normal succession or reshuffling among ruling elites – that do not convey strength so convincingly’. Thus, in fact, orthodox ways of coming to power can be more effective in creating and institutionalising one’s own power base than making use of institutionalised succession channels.

The ability of leaders to pick their own successors

As the previous section implies, autocratic leaders regularly engage in determining their own successor. In some cases, the established practice of power holders picking their own successors became a hallmark of the whole regime, such as with Mexico’s notorious ‘dedazo’ (referring to the practice of sitting presidents determining their own successor
incepted in 1938 by President Lazaro Cardenas; see Langston, 2006). Such practice, or anything coming close to it, is apparently fundamentally at odds with the norms of democratic government and governance. Still, it is important to note that all leaders are keen to leave a legacy (see Fong et al., 2019), and playing a major role in the succession game can be seen as a major factor possibly shaping a leader’s legacy. Therefore, even this most delicate feature of incumbent leaders handpicking their successors is not a 100% watertight discriminatory factor for distinguishing democratic and autocratic regimes with regard to the politics of succession.

Some non-democracies have displayed a remarkable ambition not to allow a leader to transform the existing structures into an advanced dictatorial regime by questionable succession politics. China is arguably the most important case in point. Under the rules of Gedai Zhiding, created under Deng, the current leader chose his successor’s successor, but not his own – a regime established in order to avoid the most extreme forms of domination of power and dictatorship (see Ma, 2016; Wang and Vangeli, 2016).

More remarkably perhaps, many long-term leaders in parliamentary democracies have sought to shape their own succession. Some of them became conspicuous mainly for going out of their way to keep a particular candidate, considered by many as a likely successor, at bay. Tony Blair famously explained to the British public why Gordon Brown, while being a good Chancellor, lacked the necessary qualities for becoming a good Prime Minister. Other influential leaders have not hesitated to introduce an ‘anointed heir apparent’ of their choice. This is true for Winston Churchill (officially nominating Anthony Eden early on as his successor) as much as for Australia’s long-term Prime Minister Robert Menzies (who anointed Harald Holt as his successor). Still others, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have been criticised for having done too little to groom a successor (see Wiliarty, 2018: 116). The latter suggests that there actually seems to be a certain public expectation that particularly successful leaders let their preferences be known in one way or another. However, there is also a conspicuous irony at work: While long-term and popular leaders may be best placed to pick their own successor, their own longevity and heavy legacy are likely to give their successors a particularly hard time when it comes to stepping out of their shadows and leaving their own mark. In fact, as has been shown for both party leaders and prime ministers, long-term leaders are exceptionally ‘hard acts to follow’ (see Helms, 2018; Horiuchi et al., 2015). Most successors from this category had notably short tenures and were widely perceived as ‘under-performers’, even though many of them seemed to have everything it takes, including extended ‘apprenticeships’ and reasonable experience.

**Political dynasties**

A final aspect worth considering from a comparative perspective relates to political dynasties, which were a central feature of earlier stages in the history of government (see Duindam, 2016). As mentioned above, passing the sceptre on to a family member, very often to the ruler’s son, marks an established feature of leadership succession in autocratic regimes. Political dynasties have, however, not been confined to the group of clear-cut cases of autocracy, such as North Korea (see Hakjoon, 2015) or most countries in the Arab world (see Billingsley, 2009). Empirically, cases of ‘kin selection’ at the level of executive politics have been widespread throughout Latin America and, in particular, Asia (see, for example, Purdey, 2016; Querubin, 2016; Ruud and Nielsen, 2018; Thompson, 2012). In many hybrid regimes, the daughters or wives of power holders have
featured at least as prominently in the succession game as male family members, which has not been by sheer coincidence. As Farida Jalalzai (2008: 212) has argued, ‘due to prevailing gender norms, women are more appropriate “heirs” than male relatives since they are deemed natural representatives of men, uncontaminated by their own political ambitions’ (see also Drerichs and Thompson, 2013). The power and influence of political dynasties certainly depends to a considerable extent on the prevailing contexts and circumstances; as the latter change, dynasties may lose their particular grip on power (see Ruud, 2018). However, the tenacity and adaptability of dynastic regimes should never be underestimated. The case of the Philippines suggests that occasionally even substantive institutional reforms, such as the introduction of term limits, have been unable to break the mould. While term limits for Philippine municipalities, established in 1987, led to a significant increase in the number of women running and winning in mayoral elections, this increase has been ‘entirely driven by dynastic women’ (Labonne et al., 2019: 2), that is, by female relatives of the term-limited incumbents.

Political dynasties are obviously less at home in contemporary democracies than in present-day autocratic or semi-democratic regimes, though they mark a considerably more widespread occurrence throughout the democratic world than should be expected (see Geys and Smith, 2017). Other things being equal, more mature democracies seem to hold greater reservations about political dynasties than younger and less established democratic regimes. In the United States, which has an impressive historical track record of political dynasties (see Hess, 2015), there is now a widespread uneasiness about ‘clans’ and political dynasties, even if this includes no direct succession in any particular office. This seems to have been one of the problems of Hillary Clinton’s failed attempt to win the American presidency in 2016. Similarly, while George W. Bush managed to follow in the steps of his father, his brother’s ambitions to become the 45th president of the United States were soon to be frustrated (Waggaman, 2017).

The ‘democratic credo’, on which liberal democracies are built, would suggest that the political career opportunities for members of a family or clan are reasonably limited. Still, belonging to a political dynasty has been shown to carry tangible advantages in terms of acquiring senior political office, even in mature democracies. Many prominent cases relate to dynasties at the level of parliamentary candidates and MPs (see, for example, Chandra, 2016; Fiva and Smith, 2018; Patrikios and Chatzikostantinou, 2015; Smith, 2018), but similar manifestations of dynastic politics have also been observed in the executive branch. For example, Martin and Smith (2017), studying ministerial selection in Ireland, found that politicians with a family history in cabinet do enjoy an advantage in cabinet selection, which cannot be attributed simply to greater electoral popularity (see Martin and Smith, 2017). The case of Justin Trudeau, the son of Pierre Trudeau, holder of the Canadian premiership between 1968 and 1984, suggests that being the son of an influential previous leader does not rule out the possibility of becoming a highly popular leader even in the same office (Young, 2016).

**Conclusion**

The observations in this article suggest that little concerning the politics of leadership succession in democratic and non-democratic regimes is in line with popular assumptions. Some signposts of democratic leadership successions, or the rules designed to help bringing them about for that matter – such as the existence of orderly institutionalised procedures for changing leaders or, less often, term limits – can be found in
some authoritarian regimes as well. Even more importantly, many suspected features of autocratic rule – such as leaders seeking to pick their own successors, ‘heirs apparent’, or the existence of powerful political dynasties – are to be found in even some of the most mature and advanced democracies as well.

That said, those apparent parallels, while fascinating by themselves, tend to be deceiving. After all, it does make a fundamental difference as to whether or not incumbent leaders and their successors can, at least indirectly, be held accountable by democratic means. In established democracies, even successions in which candidates ‘take over’ between elections, and without commanding a particular electoral mandate, tend to enjoy reasonable democratic legitimacy. This legitimacy flows from what has been described as a democratic ‘chain of delegation’ (Strøm, 2000), which includes the acknowledgement that between two elections parliament, as the voters’ agent, can hold governments accountable. What is more, in democratic regimes, no leader can go on indefinitely without meeting the voters (though some prime ministers can be effectively ‘shielded’ by the particular robustness of the coalition they chair, allowing them to stay in power even when the governing parties lose some of their electoral support).

Furthermore, it is important not to lose sight of the strategic moment shaping the politics of succession in different contexts. The actions of autocratic leaders should especially not be taken at face value. As Frantz and Stein (2017: 935) emphasise, succession rules in autocratic regimes (as much as several other elements superficially reminiscent of democratic governance) are usually ‘pseudo-democratic institutions’ that owe their very inception carefully calculated survival benefits; ‘specifically, they protect dictators from coup attempts because they reduce elites’ incentives to try to grab power preemptively via forceful means’. Something similar is true for elections in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, electoral authoritarian regimes, which hold multiparty elections yet violate democratic minimum standards, have come to mark by far the most common form of autocracy in the contemporary world (see Lührmann et al., 2018; Schedler, 2013).

What is needed to further advance our understanding of political succession are more sophisticated conceptualisations of leadership successions, and indicators for comparative assessment, that can be used across different types of regime. The recent paper by Teorell and Lindberg (2019) marks a major step forward in this regard. However, other agendas remain largely unfulfilled. This is true for t’ Hart and Uhr’s (2011a: 242–244) valuable suggestion to focus more systematically on aspects of power and accountability. While originally developed in the context of studying political successions in democratic regimes, this focus can be meaningfully adapted to encompass electoral and closed autocracies. Notwithstanding the absence of most formal elements of accountability that define democratic systems of government, issues of accountability are in fact of major importance for the politics of autocratic regimes (see, for example, Li and Gilli, 2014; Montagnes and Wolton, 2019). Furthermore, new typologies of and frameworks for analysing leadership successions from a comparative perspective should also take into account the (de-) legitimisation strategies of incumbents, challengers and successors that play a major role in democratic and autocratic regimes alike.

What is no less dearly needed is more and better data with a more particular focus on leadership succession and leader change. Complementing global datasets on autocratic regimes, such as that by Geddes et al. (2014), the Africa Leadership Change dataset by Carbonea and Pellegata (2018) marks a recent accomplishment in that field that impressively demonstrates the huge value of such an undertaking. That said, some of the more delicate features concerning the politics of succession are unlikely to lose their striking
ambivalence by the availability of better data. For example, while political dynasties surely mark a problematic phenomenon in democratic and democratising contexts, these particular networks have largely helped to increase the share of women in leadership positions, which is widely seen as an indicator of democratic maturity and quality (see Baturo and Gray, 2018). Such ambiguities in political reality offer an explanation why succession scholars have hesitated or struggled to come up with viable standards for evaluating political successions across different political regimes. Providing a normative yardstick for evaluating successions, that complements the commitment to better empirical data, remains, however, a core requirement for a more complete approach to comparative political succession.

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Notes
1. See, for example, Lührmann et al. (2018: 3, Table 1) whose recently introduced Regimes of the World (RoW) typology distinguishes between closed autocracies, electoral autocracies, electoral democracies and liberal democracies.
2. It is therefore no coincidence that the term ‘presidential transition’ is generally used in the United States and other presidential systems to refer to any changes in the office of president, irrespective of possible changes in party control within the legislative branch (see Pfiffner, 2009).
3. Needless to say, leaders, even newly incoming and fresh ones, can just as much suffer from their party’s unpopularity, and from a certain stage of ‘party exhaustion’ onwards there may indeed be little that leaders can do to avoid getting dragged into their party’s struggle against the downturn (see Green and Jennings, 2017: chs 5 and 6).
4. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_current_longest-ruling_non-royal_national_leaders
5. On a related note, it is worth noting that the rise of international courts have altered the parameters of dictatorial afterlives. As Krcmaric (2018: 468) reports from his comparative inquiry, ‘in the past, culpable and nonculpable leaders went into exile at virtually identical rates. Today, however, culpable leaders are about six times less likely to flee abroad because exile no longer guarantees a safe retirement’.
6. That said, other effects of international governance have been shown to have significantly more negative effects on dictators than on democratic leaders. Park (2019: 744) found that, while sanctions tend to generally hurt incumbents’ vote shares, ‘the electoral punishment is pronounced in less democratic countries because sanctions, together with elections, significantly limit dictator’s co-optation strategy and open a greater window of opportunity for once repressed opposition groups in a repressive regime’.
7. However, some military regimes do have known institutionalised regimes for succession. In particular, juntas (in contrast to strongmen) are keen ‘to ensure egalitarian principles to leadership turnover within the junta are applied’, as Lindstaedt (in press) notes. Some professionalised military regimes, which tend to be legalistic and rule bound, ‘may even negotiate the details of succession and the institutionalized formulas for rotation in power before staging a coup’, as happened in Argentina in the 1970s (Lindstaedt, in press; see also Geddes, 1999).
In a follow-up paper, Kokkonen and Sundell (2020) further managed to demonstrate that, historically, successions in the pre-democratic age, that is, before the creation of hereditary monarchies, also correlated with an increased risk of civil war.

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