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CHAPTER

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Abstract

Authoritarian learning plays an increasingly important role in global processes of autocratization and democratic backsliding yet remains understudied and undertheorized. This chapter reviews conditions that elevate the role of authoritarian learning in the international system. It assesses the state of research with a focus on definitional debates concerning what authoritarian learning is and is not. In contrast to more restrictive definitions, the chapter presents an expansive definition of authoritarian learning as a process in which autocratic actors assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of ideas, rules, norms, and practices based on their observed utility. It argues that such processes are evident in both authoritarian and democratic regimes, and operate at the domestic, regional, and international levels. Turning to research horizons in the study of authoritarian learning, it advocates for comparative work that will shed light on specific mechanisms and causal pathways of authoritarian learning.

Keywords: authoritarian learning, democratic backsliding, autocratization, isomorphism, policy diffusion, policy emulation

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Introduction

By virtually every measure, authoritarianism continues its global advance. If the overall distribution of democracies and autocracies has not changed significantly since the late 1990s, the past two decades have witnessed a persistent decline in the quality of democracy—including cases in which electoral democracies have tipped into electoral autocracies (Hungary, India, Poland, Türkiye); the erosion of democracy in countries that remain democratic; and the deepening of authoritarianism in established autocracies (Sinkkonen 2021).[1] Data from the V–Dem Institute confirm these trends. Its 2023 *Democracy Report* finds that the number of countries that are democratizing is at a fifty-year low, while autocracies are expanding their reach to a larger share of the world's population, increasing their share of the global economy, and becoming more repressive (Varieties of Democracy Institute 2023). Overall, the report concludes, "advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out" (Varieties of Democracy Institute 2023, 6). The 2022 flagship report from Freedom House presents similar findings (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). These changes have given rise to robust research programs on the phenomena of democratic backsliding and autocratization, including the role of authoritarian learning as a causal pathway that contributes to what Maerz et al. (2023) have termed "episodes of regime transformation" (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Cassani and Tomini 2018; Cassani and Tomini 2019; Erdmann et al. 2013; Skaaning 2020; Daly 2019).

In this chapter, I first review the conditions that give new prominence to authoritarian learning. These include a global turn toward incremental processes of democratic decline and away from the abrupt collapse of democracies; evidence of convergence in the strategies and tactics of autocratic actors; and the proliferation of mechanisms and institutions that facilitate authoritarian learning. The chapter then offers a critical assessment of the state of research on authoritarian learning. It highlights the challenges of defining a process that unfolds through causal pathways that are often elusive, indirect, and difficult to measure, complicating efforts to establish the boundaries and scope of authoritarian learning. Acknowledging that it remains a contested concept, I offer a concise but expansive definition of authoritarian learning as a process in which autocratic actors assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of ideas, rules, norms, and practices based on their observed utility.[2] This definition departs from others in asserting that learning may occur at the domestic, regional, or international levels, is a feature of both autocracies and democracies, and may take place through either domestic or international channels. Finally, the chapter explores research horizons in the study of authoritarian learning. It emphasizes the need for comparative empirical studies that will improve our understanding of the causal role of learning in processes of democratic backsliding and autocratization, and account for variation in the processes through which learning produces convergence in processes of democratic backsliding and autocratization.

Why Authoritarian Learning and Why Now

The Incrementalist Turn

Interest in authoritarian learning has been amplified by three prominent trends in the post–Cold War international system. The first is a shift in how processes of autocratization and backsliding occur. In recent decades, democratic ruptures—the breakdown of democracy through coups d'état or the rapid collapse of electoral institutions—have become less frequent.[3] More often, these processes now occur incrementally (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Lueders and Lust 2018). At the domestic level, incremental measures feature the manipulation of electoral, legislative, and constitutional rules by elected officials, and the parallel use of "rule by law" strategies among autocrats to further consolidate their regimes (Ginsburg and Simpser 2014). At the international level, autocrats pursue similar strategies to introduce authoritarian norms within multilateral organizations and international legal institutions (Ginsburg 2020; Spandler and Söderbaum 2023).

Learning and Convergence in the Decline of Democracy

The second trend is evidence of convergence in the strategies and tactics used to weaken democracy or strengthen autocracy—and in many cases convergence in outcomes, as well (Heydemann 2007; Van De Velde 2018; Christensen and Weinstein 2013). In democracies, the approaches used by elected leaders who undermine democracy have acquired the status of an established playbook or shared repertoire. This playbook includes strengthening executives; weakening or capturing legislatures, judiciaries, and other institutions that provide checks and balances; eroding mechanisms of accountability; sowing public distrust in established media through misinformation; reducing the autonomy of civic sectors; and embracing nativist, populist, socially regressive, and exclusionary ideologies to cultivate support among receptive segments of polarized societies. Autocrats increasingly employ a parallel, sometimes overlapping, repertoire to further fragment and repress potential challenges, whether from within ruling coalitions, from societies, or from external actors (Svolik 2012; Naím 2022). Common tactics include strengthening internal security forces; expanding the use of surveillance technologies; controlling social media; imposing restrictive regulations on NGOs; and enacting laws that entrench the discretionary authority of regimes and criminalize activities deemed oppositional. As convergence in the approaches used by autocrats and their counterparts in democracies becomes more pronounced, researchers seek to understand the extent to which they result from processes of authoritarian learning.

The Proliferation of Learning Mechanisms

The third trend is the post–Cold War proliferation of international and regional organizations, forums, and networks that serve as conduits of authoritarian learning. These include regional organizations dominated by authoritarian regimes, such as the Eurasian Economic Community formed in 2000, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) established in 2001, and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), established by Cuba and Venezuela in 2004. Such organizations have been found to facilitate processes of autocratization, stabilize existing autocracies, and shield autocracies from attempts to promote democratic norms, laws, and practices (Cottiero and Haggard 2022; Debry 2021; Ginsburg 2020; Diamond, Plattner, and Walker 2016). Autocracies have also become a more assertive presence within leading international organizations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the Organization of American States (Diamond, Plattner, and Walker 2016), where they harness the legitimacy of established institutions to pursue undemocratic aims.

These formal organizations represent only one aspect of a global authoritarian ecosystem defined by the growing density, extensity, and intensity of ties among state and non-state actors in both autocratic and democratic states. Cooperation among leaders of right-wing political parties; knowledge transfer among autocracies in techniques of repression; international conferences that bring aspiring autocrats together to share ideas; the emergence of transnational epistemic communities (Hass 2021) of consultants and autocratization practitioners—especially active in disseminating "best practices" in disinformation techniques and ways to weaken electoral processes—constitute interconnected mechanisms of leverage and linkage that have become focal points for research on pathways of authoritarian learning (Vanderhill 2012b; Levitsky and Way 2006).

What Authoritarian Learning Is and Is Not

Growing evidence of the importance of authoritarian learning has been accompanied by efforts to define it, give the term precision, specify the mechanisms through which it occurs, and clarify its effects on processes of autocratization and democratic backsliding (Hall and Ambrosio 2017; Ambrosio 2010; Daly 2019; Erdmann et al. 2013; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016). Establishing how authoritarian learning happens, and what kinds of change can be explained as the result of authoritarian learning, if only in part, are thus crucial for our ability to develop appropriate research methods to study it. These aims have been complicated, however, by attributes that authoritarian learning has in common with other phenomena through which similar ideas and practices move from one location to another, such as policy diffusion (Gilardi 2010), demonstration effects, dissemination, and isomorphism, that appear self-evidently significant yet have proven difficult to conceptualize and measure. Learning is ubiquitous. It is a potential factor in virtually any process that leads to changes in rules, norms, or practices. Yet as Hall and Ambrosio emphasize (2017, 145), citing Stein (1994, 236), "'not all change is learning'. It is therefore important not to assume that all political change is the result of learning processes."

Moreover, as with the diffusion of international norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), authoritarian learning often happens through mechanisms that are indirect. Its impact may only become evident *ex post*. Defined causal pathways that would permit us to establish where an idea or practice originated and how it moved from one setting to another are often not transparent. Indeed, in the case of authoritarian learning opacity may be intentional—as in the clandestine training provided by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to the security services of the Assad regime in Syria to enable them to repress protests more effectively (Fulton 2013).

Further, changes in rules, norms, and practices are rarely monocausal. In virtually every instance of change that weakens democracy or strengthens autocracy, multiple vectors that include elements of learning, influence, pressure, incentives, threats, and constraints interact within widely varied political contexts to produce an observed outcome. Assessing how much causal weight to attach to authoritarian learning as one vector of change among many is vexing (Hall and Ambrosio 2017). While the trends noted above make learning an important candidate explanation for aspects of autocratization and democratic backsliding, its causal role, especially when causality is indirect, can be difficult to isolate from other, interconnected, drivers of change.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, there is a broad consensus among researchers that authoritarian learning is an important means for the dissemination of autocratic ideas, norms, and practices, with some significant areas of agreement about how to define it. Perhaps the most widely applied understanding emphasizes processes of learning through observation. Autocratic regimes and autocratic actors take note of developments in other cases to learn what works and what doesn't work in specific areas of policy, law, and practice (Diamond, Tsuda, and Young 2006, Hug 2016). This may take the form of demonstration

effects that establish the efficacy of particular practices (Vanderhill 2012a). It may also take the form of defensive learning, in which autocratic actors take stock of developments that threaten authoritarian stability elsewhere and adjust domestic practices to forestall similar developments at home.

In making this general case, Hall and Ambrosio (2017, 143) define authoritarian learning as "a process in which authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based upon the prior successes and failures of other governments." Thus, Chinese leaders observed the collapse of the Soviet Union and took steps to secure their own on hold on power (Walker 2016; Nathan 2015). President Vladimir Putin watched as Color Revolutions unfolded on Russia's borders and acted to prevent a similar process (Hall 2017). Syria's president Bashar al-Assad observed the military intervention that caused the collapse of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in Libya and, early on in Syria's uprising, moved to limit state violence below a threshold that might trigger intervention (Heydemann and Leenders 2014; Heydemann and Leenders 2012). Regimes in Russia and China also observed the Arab uprisings of 2011 and took defensive steps to prevent possibilities for mass anti-regime mobilization (Koesel and Bunce 2013). Autocratic regimes track the efficacy of regulations that restrict civic sectors and move to impose similar restrictions at home (Washington Post Editorial Board 2023). This general understanding of authoritarian learning through indirect, often defensive, processes of observation, mimicry, and emulation appears frequently in literatures on both autocratization and democratic backsliding—highlighting the cross-cutting value of the concept for distinct research programs. It is prominent, as well, as in grey literature and mass media.

Once we venture beyond this baseline consensus, the literature presents a range of definitions of what authoritarian learning is and is not, highlighting areas of ongoing dialogue and debate. Hall and Ambrosio (2017), for instance, seem to limit the scope of authoritarian learning to established authoritarian regimes. For Kästner, autocratization is defined as international processes that unfold through the intentional acts of "external promoters," such that "autocratic diffusion on the level of society or autocratic learning by the elites in the target country" falls outside the scope of autocratization. This view does not reject authoritarian learning per se, but sets limits around its role in global processes of autocratization and, presumably, democratic backsliding (Kästner 2019, 413).

Others advance a more encompassing view of the role of authoritarian learning in such processes, finding evidence of learning across regime types and among both state and non-state actors (Fong 2023). From such perspectives authoritarian learning is implicated not only in the deepening of authoritarian practices in established autocracies, but in all four dimensions of "democratic recession" identified by Diamond: an "accelerating rate of democratic breakdown"; the declining quality of democracy; the deepening of authoritarianism; and a decline in democratic performance in established democracies (Diamond 2015, 144). In this view, there is no a priori reason to limit the scope of authoritarian learning to established autocracies. Rather, it is appropriate to conceptualize it as a process that can, under defined conditions, contribute to both democratic backsliding and autocratization, on both the domestic and international levels.

Differences are also evident in where to locate the boundaries of authoritarian learning within a category of mechanisms that contribute to autocratization and democratic backsliding. Observation, demonstration effects, and emulation are widely accepted as relevant mechanisms. They are often described as indirect modes of learning: that is, they induce change on the part of domestic actors without the direct intervention of external actors. Policy diffusion, policy transfer, and the active dissemination of ideas, norms, and practices are also broadly accepted as mechanisms that involve elements of learning, both direct and indirect. With respect to dissemination, for example, research indicates that autocrats—like their counterparts in democracies—learn by assessing whether policies, ideas, and norms are consistent with their own worldviews or ideologies before adopting them (Ambrosio 2010; Gilardi 2012; Winston 2018; Acharya 2004). In a similar vein, findings from research on "authoritarian gravity centers" (Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016), or on neighborhood effects in general, exhibit significant agreement about the

importance of geographic proximity in facilitating and amplifying mechanisms of authoritarian learning (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Obydenkova and Libman 2018).

Whether authoritarian learning is the product of structural or institutional conditions, however, is an area of ongoing debate. Waldner and Lust highlight the methodological challenges that attend claims linking backsliding to the structure of political systems (presidential versus parliamentary), or to conditions such as economic performance and inequality. They view "agency-based theories" as more plausible candidate explanations in accounting for backsliding, but do not explicitly refer to learning as a possible mechanism (Waldner and Lust 2018, 97). Hall and Ambrosio (2017) also express concerns about the role of structural factors. They view system-level pressures that contribute to isomorphism as beyond the scope of authoritarian learning. Like Waldner and Lust, they attach greater weight to agency-based mechanisms. In contrast to processes that invoke agency in the capacity of actors to choose whether to adopt a norm, rule, or policy, Hall and Ambrosio refer to isomorphism as a process that constrains agency: it occurs when "institutions are copied because of constraints, either internal or external" (Hall and Ambrosio 2017, 146).

Yet processes that produce convergence of institutions or policies are not only the result of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).[4] This view of isomorphism neglects the benefits of institutional or regulatory convergence and the agency of political actors in bringing it about. Benefits include increasing returns to scale; gains from coordination associated with increasing convergence in norms, rules, and practices; mitigating the transaction costs autocrats face when they adopt policies rejected by powerful liberal democracies, such as regressive, exclusionary social policies justified in the name of "traditional family values." Indeed, much of the literature on the role of regional organizations in autocratization and backsliding emphasize the incentives that isomorphism creates for autocratic actors in terms of regime stability, access to resources, diplomatic or even military support in international disputes, and opportunities for trade and investment (Cottiero and Haggard 2021; Cottiero and Haggard 2022). A purely structural view of isomorphism also overlooks the scope for agency and learning in determining how autocratic actors respond to structural pressures. Even when institutional forms converge, their content may nonetheless vary in ways that express the agency of political actors. Thus, isomorphism as a possible source of authoritarian learning cannot be ruled out *ex ante*.

While recognizing that it remains a contested concept, we can still offer a general definition of authoritarian learning as a process in which autocratic actors assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of ideas, rules, norms, and practices based on their observed utility. Pathways of learning may be domestic, regional, or international. They may originate within both autocracies and democracies. They may be internally motivated or the result of external actors. Further, authoritarian learning occurs through a range of agent-based mechanisms, both direct and indirect, that operate at the domestic, regional, and international levels. These include emulation, demonstration effects, policy transfer, and norm dissemination, as well as mechanisms of linkage, and leverage. The focus on such agent-based mechanisms is responsive to Hall and Ambrosio's (2017) distinction between "the intentional adoption of policies …" as opposed to "… processes in which this intentionality is lacking" (Hall and Ambrosio's (2017, 145). In contrast to their definition, however, the one proposed here leaves open the possibility that learning can occur as an effect of structural conditions, including isomorphism, on the strategic choices of actors.

Our understanding of the range of actors associated with authoritarian learning should also be enlarged beyond those state-based actors holding formal positions of power in executive, legislative, and judicial branches. In recent decades, non-state actors have played an increasingly important role in processes of authoritarian learning. Across the Middle East—in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya—non-state armed groups have taken stock of one another's successes and failures. They have adopted similar strategies to extend their influence beyond the battlefield and into the political and economic arenas (Lacher 2023; Heydemann 2023; Salehyan 2020; Mikaelian and Salloukh 2016). These strategies now

routinely include the formation or capture of political parties by militias that remain under the control of non-state leaders.

The definition of authoritarian learning proposed here is expansive, intentionally so. It extends research horizons by including within its scope mechanisms, processes, pathways, and actors that some other definitions define as out of scope. Nonetheless, this definition is not all-encompassing. Broadening how we conceptualize what authoritarian learning is requires a keen sense of what it is not. If learning amplifies and accelerates autocratization and democratic backsliding, numerous processes and mechanisms outside the scope of authoritarian learning also contribute to these trends.

Such mechanisms include the routine diplomatic processes of cooperation between and coordination among autocracies that stabilizes or deepens authoritarian rule. Autocracies routinely exert influence that serves to reinforce autocratization in other countries, in the form of economic and military assistance, trade agreements, the upgrading of surveillance and communications technologies, and support in sanctions avoidance. In exploring China's use of such mechanisms in neighboring states, for example, Fong concludes that from "Cambodia and the Philippines to Myanmar and Thailand, China's exporting influence has been found to be a major international driver accelerating or consolidating autocratization" (Fong 2023, 1284). Russia's role in its near abroad has been described in similar terms (Hug 2016; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016). These mechanisms occupy an important position in global processes of autocratization but are distinct from authoritarian learning as defined here.[5]

Endogenous processes outside the scope of authoritarian learning may also contribute to democratic backsliding and autocratization. To offer just on example, authoritarian regimes may become more effective in their tactics through processes of organizational learning that are not necessarily authoritarian in their form or content. These forms of learning have been identified even among non-state actors, including terrorist organizations (Goerzig 2019). Similar processes may lead to adjustments in the tactics and strategies of autocratic actors in democratic settings. In the United States, extreme right-wing networks associated with the Trump administration developed extensive plans for a future Trump presidency. Their plans reflected "lessons learned" from their failure to centralize power and impose the president's authority over the "administrative state" during his first term in office (Swan, Savage, and Haberman 2023). Such efforts certainly reflect learning, but through processes that are more appropriately viewed as organizational rather than authoritarian learning.

Along related lines, an extensive research literature examines the strategic logics that lead elected incumbents to change electoral rules and institutions to diminish competition and enhance their likelihood of reelection (Svolik 2019). Haggard and Kaufman (2021) highlight the endogenous role of political polarization as a factor in processes of backsliding, though polarization processes often involve elements of learning through the actions of political entrepreneurs who participate in autocratic epistemic communities. The autocratic equivalent of the endogenous mechanisms that Rustow (1970) associated with the deepening of democratic norms through positive feedback loops can also serve as a vector of backsliding and autocratization through the payoffs that accrue to actors who adopt policies and practices that strengthen their hold on power. In the United States, India, Brazil, Hungary, Türkiye, and Poland, prominent candidates built legitimacy and popular support in part through their advocacy of illiberal if not explicitly autocratic positions and platforms. In each of these cases, their subsequent political gains created incentives to "double down" on their electoral strategies, deepening processes of democratic backsliding.

These examples underscore the importance of carefully delineating the scope of authoritarian learning. As noted, not all change, and not even all change that moves polities in more autocratic directions, can be explained by authoritarian learning. The definition proposed here expands the boundaries of the concept. It does not erase them.

Research Horizons in the Study of Authoritarian Learning

As defined in this chapter, authoritarian learning can take many forms, follow many pathways, and involve a wide range of state and non-state actors. It occurs, as well, in a diverse and varied set of political, economic, and social domains, and through a diverse set of mechanisms. It has been identified as a factor in changes in legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, in media sectors and the use of surveillance technologies, in the status of civic sectors and in state–society relations more broadly, in the practices of security sectors, in the management and avoidance of economic sanctions, in the tactics of non-state armed groups, and in processes of cultural, social, and ideological polarization that have reshaped political landscapes in democracies and autocratic regimes alike. Motivations for learning also differ. If political survival or retention in office are always primary motivations for learning, the specific circumstances in which learning occurs vary widely. They range from defensive motivations for authoritarian learning such as coup-proofing and diffusion-proofing (Koesel and Bunce 2013), to developmental (Kästner 2019), strategic, and even opportunistic motivations.

To date, however, research on authoritarian learning has focused principally on establishing its presence—affirming its contribution to outcomes that are appropriately understood to result from complex, multi-causal processes. This approach is apparent in research that treats convergence in strategies and tactics—such as the spread of similar laws criminalizing foreign funding to NGOs—as *ex post* evidence of learning. Attention to such first-order questions has helped anchor research on authoritarian learning in robust conceptual and empirical foundations. Nonetheless, relevant research literatures tend to treat authoritarian learning as one dimensional, a process that unfolds in relatively uniform fashion across regime types, institutional domains, local contexts, and actors. The imperatives of seeking or holding onto power are seen as sufficient to account for authoritarian learning.

As a result, crucial areas of research remain largely understudied. What conditions are most conducive to authoritarian learning? How do learning processes differ in democracies and autocracies? Which institutional, social, and other domains are most likely to be affected by authoritarian learning? Why might some such domains be less vulnerable to its effects? Which actors are most likely to engage in authoritarian learning? Do the mechanisms through which learning happens influence its efficacy—whether a relevant change becomes consolidated within a polity? How can we distinguish more effectively between the various mechanisms associated with authoritarian learning, such as emulation, diffusion, and policy transfer? We also lack research on failures of authoritarian learning, perhaps because it often works indirectly, though causal pathways that can be difficult to measure.

As an example of these gaps, take processes through which incumbents weaken judiciaries. In some cases, such as Türkiye under President Erdoğan, this can occur through institutional capture. The country is formally an electoral democracy with a constitutionally mandated separation of powers, but Erdoğan used his power of appointment and other authorities to purge independent judges and replace them with loyalists (Tahiroglu 2020; International Commission of Jurists 2016), consolidating executive control over an increasingly compliant judiciary. Popular protests against these changes were sporadic and short-lived. In Israel, as of mid-2023, an extreme right-wing coalition with a modest majority, in a country with no constitution, approved legislation weakening the authority of the Supreme Court, in the face of massive popular opposition. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party worked successfully since 2015 to criminalize the exercise of judicial independence and to impose compliant appointees on the courts, contravening the constitution (Śledzińska-Simon 2018). The prime mover in the Polish case has been the legislative branch, dominated by an empowered ruling party that governed with an absolute majority in both upper and lower houses from 2015 to 2019, retained a majority in the lower house following elections in 2019, but was voted out of power in elections in October 2023, an outcome that energized efforts to reverse the autocratic policies of the prior government.[6]

These cases all fit an incremental model of democratic backsliding in which elected incumbents observed and learned from experiences elsewhere and took actions leading to similar outcomes. Yet their differences are consequential. The weakening of judiciaries involved different branches of government, variation in the strength of dominant parties, the presence or absence of a constitution. Critically, these differences may also affect the sustainability of backsliding measures. Poland's Law and Justice Party lost control of the upper house by one seat in elections in 2019. Its majority in the lower house was overturned in 2023. The opposition in Israel has been emboldened and strengthened by mass protests against backsliding measures targeting the judiciary. It may be able to overturn the governing coalition in future elections and protect the authority of the Supreme Court to veto legislation. In Türkiye, on the other hand, an empowered presidency and assertive president, constitutional reforms weakening oversight of the executive, combined with mass purges of judges seen as disloyal, have contributed to the institutionalization of a weakened judiciary with little near-term prospect of reversing this trend.

Does this imply that presidential systems are more conductive to successful backsliding than parliamentary systems? If so, under what conditions would this relationship prevail? Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro—who explicitly emulated backsliding strategies of the Trump administration and counterparts in Eastern Europe—sought to erode judicial autonomy during his term in office (2019–2022). Unlike Erdoğan, however, he was unable to do so (Bustamante and Meyer 2022). Following an attempted coup to remain in office after losing elections—an episode explicitly modeled after Trump's January 6, 2021 insurrection in the United States—judges on the country's highest electoral court barred Bolsonaro from running for office for eight years. His tenure stands as an example in which an aspiring autocratic president was unable to impose his authority over the judiciary, despite following a "dictator's playbook" (Naím 2022) of backsliding strategies and tactics that have become increasingly globalized and increasingly standardized, in part through processes of authoritarian learning.

As these examples suggest, research horizons in the study of authoritarian learning may benefit from a turn to comparative questions about patterns and variation in learning processes, with a focus on the conditions under which it contributes to autocratization and backsliding and how it does so, including comparisons of the efficacy of various mechanisms associated with authoritarian learning. Such questions, however, raise important methodological concerns. Are claims about learning falsifiable? Is it appropriate to work toward a taxonomy of the mechanisms associated with authoritarian learning, as a step toward more rigorous comparative research on processes and effects of authoritarian learning under specific conditions? What indicators would permit us to specify and test for the causal effects of passive mechanisms of learning such as emulation? More rigorous and widespread use of counterfactuals might be one way to respond to such questions. Establishing the probability that outcomes of interest would have occurred, and would have taken the observed form, in the absence of authoritarian learning is an important step toward establishing its causal efficacy.

At the same time, while debates about the rise of incrementalist strategies of autocratization and backsliding, together with the notion of a "dictator's playbook," have amplified the visibility and potential significance of authoritarian learning, we should not lose sight of its role in ongoing, coercive forms of democratic breakdown, including coups d'état such as those experienced across Western and Central Africa in the early 2020s (Felbab-Brown 2023). Attention to authoritarian learning in legislative, executive, judicial, and constitutional domains should not imply the neglect of its role in the domain of authoritarian repression, especially with respect to coercive capacities, the repression of civic sectors, the criminalization of dissent, torture techniques, surveillance regimes, the globalization of sanctions avoidance tactics, and the embrace of illicit economic practices on the part of sanctioned regimes.

Future research on authoritarian learning will also benefit from attention to factors that blunt or mitigate its effects, such as those that undermined backsliding attempts by Bolsonaro. These may be case specific. They may also be systemic, associated with the cumulative weight on autocratic actors of the dense array of

metrics, indicators, rankings, and hierarchies that define the boundaries of appropriate practice in an international system that is now multipolar but still dominated by Western democracies. Fourcade points to the gravitational effects of the "cultural–organizational nebula that Meyer and his colleagues call 'world society [which has] tasked itself with the rationalization of what states 'must' be and do in order to be considered legitimate sovereign entities" (Fourcade 2017, 104). In the past two decades, the forcefield generated by this nebula has receded. Autocratization has advanced sufficiently to exert an opposing forcefield of its own. Yet it continues to matter, as evidenced by the extent to which autocratization processes so often occur through the emulation of democratic attributes and practices.

The study of authoritarian learning has achieved notable advances. Its presence and significance have become widely accepted as contributing to both autocratization and democratic backsliding. In other respects, however, our understanding of authoritarian learning remains underdeveloped, especially with respect to comparative research that is needed to give specificity to where, when, and under what conditions authoritarian learning can be established as a meaningful factor in changes that weaken democracy or strengthen autocracy. In short, learning about learning remains a priority.

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Notes

1   Data provided by Freedom House for its flagship report, *Freedom in the World*, shows relative stability in the distribution of countries ranked free, partly free, and not free since 1989–1990. See "Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses, 1973–2023."https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Ffreedomhouse.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2023-02%2FCountry_and_Territory_Ratings_and_Statuses_FIW_1973-2023%2520.xlsx&psig=AOvVaw2qazzzVWuYq6cxdbubEdfu&ust=1709136911686000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CAgQrpoMahcKEwiQ36yl9cuEAxUAAAAAHQAAAAAQBA .

2   Throughout this chapter, autocratic actors are understood to be present in both established autocracies and in democracies.

3   Coups d'état remain exceptional events as drivers of autocratization despite a recent wave of coups in West and Central Africa that includes Niger (2023), Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Chad (2021), Guinea (2021), and Gabon Tunisia (2021), Sudan (2021) and Egypt (2013) might also fit within this wave.

4   DiMaggio and Powell (1983) view isomorphism as coercive when it involves mandatory adaptations, such as government mandates, or changes required to bring an economy into compliance with organizational rules, such as aligning economic practices with the requirements of membership in the World Trade Organization. They do not define isomorphism as intrinsically coercive.

5   Note, however, that organizational learning by autocratic actors in electoral democracies can be seen as a "dual-use" process. For example, right-wing actors in the United States, like their democratic counterparts, have worked assiduously to hone fundraising operations in ways that reflect organizational learning and not authoritarian learning, per se. In the process, though, they have expanded misinformation flows that represent a possible, if contested, vector of authoritarian learning with the potential to deepen existing polarization trends and thus contribute to democratic backsliding (Sunstein 2018; Guess et al. 2023; Nyhan et al. 2023).

6   Elections in Poland are currently scheduled to be held in October 2023. At the time of this writing, the ruling party is leading the opposition coalition in public opinion polls.