

Strong elites, weak resistance: Elite collective action and dictatorial power grabs

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Abstract

Dictators are notoriously untrustworthy allies, often seeking to consolidate power at the expense of their own supporters. While some ruling coalitions are too weak to resist this, others possess the capacity to push back. Why, then, do these powerful elites often fail to prevent personalization? This study argues that strong elites face a collective action problem when resisting the dictator. Given their strength, as long as one of them resists, the autocrat's power remains constrained, benefiting all members of the ruling coalition. This creates an incentive to free ride. Elites let other regime members do the work of resisting, hoping to capture the benefits of power sharing without having to pay the costs of confrontation. As more elites fall for this calculus, inaction becomes inevitable, enabling dictators to consolidate power. Contrary to the prevailing view, power sharing does not always constrain autocrats. Depending on how dictators share power, they may create strategic incentives that facilitate personalization.

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Being a dictator used to be a more perilous job. Autocratic leaders had to walk a fine line: they had to amass enough power to secure their rule, but not so much that they would alienate their ruling coalition. Otherwise, overly ambitious autocrats could soon find themselves ousted by their own supporters. But this balance has now shifted. Increasingly, dictators have managed to monopolize power while also keeping the instances of elite rebellion at a record low (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017; Chin et al., 2021). Personalization appears to be an increasingly safer bet for autocrats.

The rise of personalism is especially puzzling given its timing. I define personalism as the extent to which a dictator has centralized decision-making authority and undermined the autonomy of institutions and regime elites (Baturu, 2024; Escribà-Folch and Timoneda, 2024; Slater, 2009). Not long ago, researchers were documenting the opposite pattern: the spread of authoritarian power-sharing institutions (Gandhi, 2008; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Svolik, 2012). These institutions were expected to constrain autocrats by giving elites the means to resist power grabs. Yet despite their widespread adoption, personalist rule is now expanding. Dictators, it would seem, have managed to centralize power precisely when elites seemed most capable of stopping them. But why would powerful elites accept power grabs that leave them at the mercy of the leader?

This article seeks to explain how personalization occurs in the presence of strong elites¹. In doing so, it addresses a gap in our knowledge. Existing theories largely explain personalization as a function of elite weakness: when elites lack the capacity to resist, dictators move quickly to purge or sideline them (Escribà-Folch et al., 2020; Geddes et al., 2018; Paine, 2022; Sudduth, 2017). In contrast, under strong elites, autocrats choose to respect and expand power sharing to avoid being overthrown (Meng, 2019; Svolik, 2012). In this view, weak elites inevitably become weaker, and strong elites stay strong. It leaves little room for reversals in which strong elites lose ground to the dictator. Yet this pattern is not uncommon. The powerful UMNO lost most of its authority to Mahathir, and Suharto similarly sidelined influential generals in Indonesia (Slater, 2003, 2009). The Mexican PRI, a prime example of a strong elite, also saw its power wane after presidents moved against it (Kaire, 2025). A few studies have begun to explore the factors and strategies that allow dictators to weaken powerful

elites (Boutton, 2019; Song and Wright, 2018), but the mechanisms that enable personalization in the face of elite strength remain underexplored.

I argue that elite strength can facilitate personalization by fostering inaction among regime insiders. Much of the existing literature conceptualizes elite resistance as coordination to remove the leader, typically through coups (Geddes et al. 2018; Sudduth 2017; Svolik 2012). In contrast, I focus on less dramatic—and more common—forms of resistance. Specifically, I define resistance as efforts by regime members to prevent or halt the personalization of power. This kind of resistance functions as a public good within the ruling coalition: it benefits all of its members, regardless of who contributes to it. Elites as a whole enjoy greater security in their positions when the dictator's whims are not the difference between life and death. But the costs of resistance are borne only by those who carry it out. This asymmetry between how the benefits and the costs of resistance are distributed creates a powerful incentive to free ride. Elites may let others confront the dictator in hopes of avoiding the costs while still reaping the benefits. However, resistance collapses when all elites adopt this logic. The dictator is then free to consolidate power, confident that no one will step in to stop them, even when elites have the means to do so.

Earlier research identified institutionalization as a key source of elite strength (Gandhi, 2008; Meng et al., 2023; Myerson, 2008; Svolik, 2012). But the link between institutionalization and elite influence is a tenuous one. Institutions can empower elites, but they can also divide them by creating divergent incentives. Recent work shows that factionalism can undermine elite resistance even when genuine power-sharing arrangements are in place (Arriola et al., 2021; Geddes et al., 2018; Kaïre, 2024). I extend this argument by showing that elite inaction does not require institutional heterogeneity or deep rivalries. Personalization can emerge simply from having many powerful elites. Contrary to the view that broad power sharing constrains leaders (Bueno De Mesquita et al., 2003), dictators might find the most room to maneuver when they distribute power widely among their supporters.

Elite power and the causes of personalism

All autocrats rely on regime elites that help them run the state and stay in power. But not all elites are created equal. Some are weak, and others are strong. The difference between them is that the latter pose a real threat to the autocrat (Boix and Svolik, 2013). Strong elites are those who have, in principle, the capacity to unseat dictators². This capacity derives from their positions within the state. Well-funded militaries give generals the soldiers

and guns they need to oust autocrats. Legislatures and hegemonic parties give civilian elites the resources and information to do the same (Albertus and Menaldo, 2012; Little, 2017; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010; Meng, 2020; Woo and Conrad, 2019). The threat of ouster puts dictators on notice. It tells them that any attempts to wrestle power away from their elites may land them in prison or worse. Or at least that was the expectation. While overall strong elites do deter power grabs, this is not always the case.

Consider the case of Malaysia. Under the UMNO, the country was a prime example of institutionalized party rule (Crouch, 1996; MacIntyre, 1992). For six decades, the ruling party's influence extended to all branches of government, the media, and the coercive apparatus. Its patronage network ensured broad support among the dominant ethnic Malays and a weak opposition. For most of the UMNO's tenure, these advantages kept leaders from challenging the party's dominance (Gomez and Jomo, 1997). But things changed once Mahathir came to power. Gradually, he managed to erode the party's autonomy. He sidelined rival factions, packed institutions with his own loyal followers, and rigged UMNO's internal procedures (Slater, 2003). He subordinated the party to his leadership. Malaysian observers agreed that, at the height of Mahathir's power, the only role left for party elites was to rubber-stamp his decisions (Ho, 1992).

The story of UMNO is not uncommon. Other strong elites have shared similar fates. Uzbekistan's clan leaders went from seeing Karimov as a puppet they could control to being beholden to him (Collins, 2004; Ilkhamov, 2007). The Romanian Politburo were confident that Ceaușescu "would obsequiously abide by the rules of 'collective leadership'" (Tismaneanu 2003, 193). Instead, he promptly purged the old guard and subjugated the party to his cult of personality. These cases may be extreme, but most autocracies are susceptible to similar power grabs by dictators, even if they have a strong elite (Goldring and Matthews, 2021; Wong and Chan, 2021). About 70% of autocracies experience a purge of the ruling coalition at some point (Banks and Wilson, 2024; Easton and Siverson, 2018). Figure 1 shows that close to half of these purges occur when the elite has above average levels of influence³. This finding is consistent across measures of elite influence. According to data by Geddes et al. (2018) 59% of purges occur when dictators have below average levels of personalization. That same figure is 42% according to data by Gandhi and Sumner (2020). Across measures of elite influence, we see that there is no shortage of dictators successfully undermining powerful elites. But this leaves us with a puzzle: why would strong elites who can oppose ambitious dictators accept personalization?

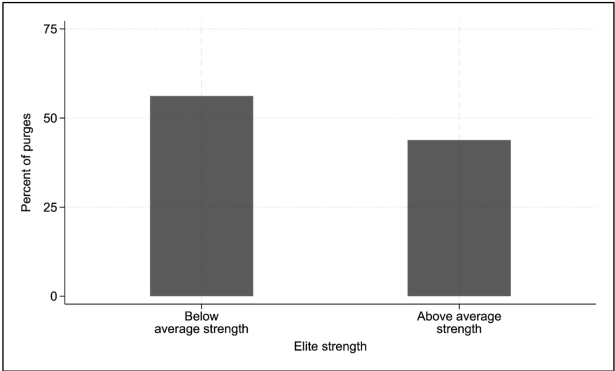


Figure 1. Distribution of ruling coalition purges by elite strength. Figure 1 shows the distribution of purges as measured by [Easton and Siverson \(2018\)](#), updated with the CNTS data ([Banks and Wilson, 2024](#)). Elite strength data comes from [Kaïre \(2024\)](#), below and above average refer to autocracy-year observations that have above or below the global mean of elite coordination.

Despite growing research interest in the sources of personalism, there is still much we do not yet know. Existing explanations have a hard time accounting for shifts in the balance of power between autocrats and their elite. We know why weak elites remain weak. Some point to the characteristics of the founding ruling coalition ([Geddes et al., 2018](#); [Leber et al., 2023](#)). When these elite members lack cohesion or oversight capabilities, dictators know elite rebellion is unlikely and are free to accumulate power. Others similarly note that elites who are in a position of weakness, either because of political circumstances or an unfavorable institutional framework, will see their power further curtailed by the autocrat ([Bokobza et al., 2022](#); [Escribà-Folch et al., 2020](#); [Sudduth, 2017](#)). Conversely, theories of endogenous institutionalization see strong elites as only getting stronger with time ([Arriola, 2009](#); [Magaloni, 2008a](#); [Meng, 2020](#); [Reuter, 2017](#); [Svolik, 2012](#)). Dictators with powerful elites proactively give their ruling coalition more power and resources to satisfy them and avoid a challenge. Current theories emphasize the continuity of outcomes. What is missing from these accounts is an explanation for why strong ruling coalitions become weak.

There are, admittedly, some explanations of personalism that can better account for these reversals of fortune. Some have pointed to factors external to the regime. Autocrats who come across natural resources or generous foreign benefactors can gain the resources and backing necessary to push

against powerful elites (Boutton, 2019; Casey, 2020; Fails, 2020). Others have documented the strategies dictators can use to undermine power sharing. Autocrats can enlarge the ruling coalition to dilute the power of influential elite members and gain maneuvering room (Timoneda, 2020; Woldense, 2022). They can also rig power sharing procedures, such as party leadership elections, in their favor or circumvent them entirely by creating parallel structures of power (Slater, 2003, 2009). Taken together, these studies give us a better sense of the opportunities dictators can encounter or create to escape the grasp of influential regime members.

These latter theories, however, only explore one side of the coin. They tell us how autocrats accumulate power in the presence of strong elites, but not why strong elites fail to prevent it. In some cases, leaders may disarm elites through sly political maneuvering. But, given how commonly powerful elites end up losing influence, it is likely that there are other forces at play. I will argue that there are structural causes that can keep strong elites from capitalizing on their capacity to punish dictators. It turns out that power sharing can be a double-edged sword for elite members. While it can give them the means to resist, it can also create pernicious incentives. As the number of powerful members within the ruling coalition increases, the incentive to free ride and let others do the job of resisting the dictator also increases. In turn, as more elite members fall prey to this calculus, the leader can evade the constraints of past power sharing pacts.

This argument complements existing accounts that emphasize the role of imperfect information in the personalization of power. Svoblik (2012) shows that leaders may succeed in early power grabs because elites fail to recognize ambiguous signals of autocratic ambition. The mechanism developed here operates even when such uncertainty is limited. Even when elites recognize personalization attempts, resistance may fail because opposing the leader is costly and responsibility for doing so can be deferred. Free riding incentives therefore help explain why elites remain inactive not only when information is imperfect, but also when threats are understood.

Elite resistance as a free rider problem

Intra-elite politics are cutthroat. The elevation of one regime member often means the downfall of another. Elites who side with the dictator to take down fellow regime members get rewarded with rents and more prominent positions. It may therefore be tempting for elites to capitalize on the misfortune of others, but it is a dangerous strategy over the long term. Those who facilitate the purging of others may soon find themselves facing the autocrat alone. That is a perilous position for any elite member. Except in the most

unusual cases, individual elites are not strong enough to oppose the autocrat. They can only do so with the help of others. Elites who lack allies are at the mercy of dictators. It pays to forgo the short-term benefit of supporting the leader's power grabs in favor of the long-term benefit of maintaining a robust ruling coalition.

Indeed, autocratic elites spend substantial effort generating institutional responses to the perils of elite schisms (Brownlee, 2007; Langston, 2002; Reuter and Turovsky, 2014). Power-sharing institutions like political parties and legislatures are useful not only because they take some power away from the autocrat, but also because they maintain elite cohesion. The shared hierarchy and incentives of these institutions can enforce intra-elite loyalty in the face of pressure from the dictator (Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2008b). They also extend the time horizon of regime members and provide a parallel way for political advancement that is not tied to the dictator's favor. It is therefore not surprising that current research sees these institutions as a way for elites to maintain their potential for rebellion and guard against personalization.

However, broader power sharing is not always good news for elite coordination. To see why, it is useful to recognize that elite resistance functions as a public good among regime insiders. All regime members benefit from not living under a dictator who can freely purge or eliminate them. Resistance to personalization keeps the autocrat constrained and less able to act arbitrarily against members of the ruling coalition. Crucially, these benefits are non-excludable: they accrue to all elites, regardless of who bears the costs of opposing the leader.

The non-excludable nature of successful resistance creates strong incentives for inaction. Confronting the dictator is never costless. Elites who resist and fail may be purged, imprisoned, or killed. Even when resistance is likely to succeed, it requires substantial political capital and organizational resources. Faced with these costs, elites may prefer to let others confront the dictator, hoping to enjoy the benefits of constraint without paying for it. The combination of high individual costs and shared benefits may then demobilize strong elites that could, in principle, resist the dictator's power grabs.

In contrast to the argument presented here, existing work often conceptualizes elite resistance as a coordination problem centered around the removal of the leader (Geddes, 1999; Magaloni and Romero, 2008; Svolik, 2012). In this framework, free riding incentives are muted, as individual elites seek to align themselves with the likely winners to secure a favorable position after the struggle over leadership is over. An implicit assumption in this view is that successful resistance entails a fundamental reconfiguration

of power, creating opportunities for victorious elites to expand their influence. However, not all elite resistance implies such drastic changes.

Strong elites, who are beneficiaries of the *status quo*, have good reasons to avoid major redistributions of power. Because they already occupy advantageous positions, attempts to remove the leader outright can introduce significant uncertainty and risk, potentially destabilizing the arrangements from which they benefit (Corda, 2023). Rather than opening Pandora's box, influential elites, who benefit from power sharing, may instead engage in more subtle forms of resistance, including legislative opposition, information hoarding or strategic release, and foot-dragging (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Hollyer et al., 2018; Schuler and Westerland, 2022; Wiebrecht, 2021; Wright, 2008).

My argument addresses this broader form of resistance aimed at preventing personalization and shoring up power sharing. When successful, resistance of this kind does not lead to a wholesale reconfiguration of power and increased opportunities for advancement within the political system. Instead, this type of resistance leads to a constrained executive and more predictable politics, benefiting all regime insiders regardless of who bore the costs of opposition. It is this non-excludable benefit, continued constraint rather than leader replacement, that incentivizes elites to free ride on the efforts of others.

Importantly, elite strength alone is not sufficient to generate free riding incentives. What matters is whether multiple elites are strong enough that resistance would plausibly succeed even if not all elite members pitch in. It is in that context that elites may be tempted to let others do the work. When only one elite actor possesses the capacity to challenge the autocrat, that actor cannot rely on others and therefore faces strong incentives to act. Free riding becomes attractive only when overall elite strength is distributed across a large ruling coalition, such that several actors independently possess the capacity to resist. In this configuration, each elite can rationally expect that others may bear the costs of confrontation, making inaction a viable strategy. As a result, responsibility for opposing the leader becomes increasingly diffuse, undermining coordinated resistance even though the coalition remains strong.

A model of free riding and elite resistance

This section applies well-established game-theoretic insights on public goods provision and free riding to the study of personalization under strong elites. The model adapts standard collective-action logic to a political setting in which elite resistance has typically been analyzed through coordination or

bargaining frameworks (Geddes, 1999; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Kaire, 2025; Svulik, 2012).

The model revolves around two strong elites who are trying to decide between resisting the dictator’s power grabs or acquiescing. I refer to them as strong because I assume that they can successfully resist the dictator with some positive probability. If both acquiesce, then the dictator’s power increases. In contrast, the power grab gets thwarted as long as one strong elite resists. It is then in the interest of regime members to resist because, all else equal, they prefer to keep their current share of power. However, resisting carries a cost. Incurring that cost is unappealing, particularly if the other elite ends up resisting. Elites know that as long as one of them resists the power grab, the current distribution of power will remain. Elite resistance functions as a public good within the ruling coalition; it benefits all members of the group even if they did not contribute to it. The goal of the model is to show the circumstances under which these powerful elites will prefer to free ride even if doing so risks losing some of their power to the dictator.

In the game, both elites have some share of power unique to them $s_i > 1$, where i indexes the elites. If elites decide to resist, there is a chance of them keeping their power s_i intact. The chance of success is proportional to the power of the elites who participate in the challenge. So, if both elites, resist, they can expect to receive $s_i(s_1 + s_2)$ minus the cost of resisting k . In case that only one elite resists, the one mobilizing obtains the same payoff as before but without the benefit of the other one resisting. Elite 1 would then receive $s_1^2 - k$ for resisting alone. Aided by Elite 1, the second elite would retain their power-share and avoid the costs of resisting, securing a payoff of s_1s_2 . If both elites decide to acquiesce instead, then they are left with only a portion of their power ωs_i , $\omega \in (0, 1)$. Figure 2 summarizes the payoffs.

		Elite 2	
		Resist	Acquiesce
Elite 1	Resist	$s_1(s_1 + s_2) - k$ $s_2(s_1 + s_2) - k$	$s_1^2 - k$ s_1s_2
	Acquiesce	s_1s_2 $s_2^2 - k$	ωs_1 ωs_2

Figure 2. The elite resistance game.

Analysis of equilibria in pure strategies

Consistent with the patterns in Figure 1, the game supports a variety of outcomes. Consider first the private provision of resistance. These are cases where one elite is willing to resist even when the other one does not. This occurs when the benefit from resisting is big enough for one elite, but the other is sufficiently weak relative to the costs of resisting. For example, for Elite 2 to acquiesce given that Elite 1 resists, it must be the case that: $s_2(s_1 + s_2) - k < s_1 s_2$ or $s_2^2 < k$. Meanwhile, Elite 1 will stick to resisting alone if doing so offers a better payoff than personalization: $s_1^2 - k > \omega s_1$ or $k < s_1^2 - \omega s_1$. We can then anticipate the private provision of resistance when:

$$s_j^2 < k < s_i^2 - \omega s_i$$

Mutual resistance can also be a unique equilibrium. From the above, we know that this will be the case under two conditions. First, both elites need to be powerful enough so that $s_i^2 > k$. If that is the case, then free riding will not be an equilibrium since it requires either $s_1^2 < k$ or $s_2^2 < k$. Second, mutual acquiescence must also be a non-equilibrium outcome. This occurs if $k < s_1^2 - \omega s_1$ or if $k < s_2^2 - \omega s_2$, which ensures that at least one elite has an incentive to resist.

Crucially, however, there are conditions under which mutual resistance and acquiescence are both stable outcomes. These multiple equilibria are theoretically important because they more closely resemble the empirical evolution of strong elites. Powerful regime insiders rarely acquiesce entirely and give the leader free rein. They do not always resist either. Otherwise, we would not see instances of strong elites growing weak. Instead, we see strong elites successfully coordinate sometimes and not others. The conditions for this follow from above. Mutual resistance is an equilibrium as long as $s_i^2 < k$. Mutual acquiescence only necessitates that $k > s_2^2 - \omega s_2$. So, mutual resistance and acquiescence can be sustained as multiple equilibria if:

$$s_i^2 - \omega s_i < k < s_i^2$$

The inequality above describes some of the reasons why strong elites who could resist the dictator's power grabs may choose not to do it. It partly depends on the elite's prospects after the power grab (ω) and the costs of confrontation. Confrontation cannot be so high that it makes resisting unproductive, but also not low enough that resisting always the best strategy. Additionally, elites need to see an acceptable future in a world where they

allow for the power grab. When ω is sufficiently high, elites can afford to acquiesce in hopes of avoiding a costly confrontation.

The multiple equilibria with mutual resistance and acquiescence also indicates that there is a third equilibrium to consider. From the oddness theorem, and the fact that the private provision of resistance is not an equilibrium in this context, we know that, if the conditions for the multiple equilibria hold, there must also be a third equilibrium in which elites mix between resistance and acquiescence. It is in this new equilibrium that we see elites free riding.

Elite free riding as a mixed strategy equilibrium

Personalization can arise from strong elites mixing between resistance and acquiescence to disincentivize free riding. This equilibrium derives from players not committing to a single strategy so they can keep the other guessing. For example, Elite 1 can resist with probability p so that Elite 2 will be indifferent between their options. To do so, Elite 1 must ensure that:

$$p^* = \frac{\omega s_2 + k - s_2^2}{\omega s_2}$$

The equation for p^* will support a mixed strategy equilibrium as long as $0 < p^* < 1$, or when $s_2^2 - \omega s_2 < k < s_2^2$ as seen above. Similarly, a mixed strategy equilibrium will exist when Elite 2 resists with probability

$$q^* = \frac{\omega s_1 + k - s_1^2}{\omega s_1}.$$

From the equilibrium equations for p^* and q^* , we know that resistance by one elite becomes less common as the other elite becomes more powerful. As s_i increases, the probability of resistance decreases. In other words, elites try to capitalize on the strength of their counterparts. The stronger one elite is, the more likely it is they will resist, which incentivizes the other to acquiesce so they can avoid the costs of confrontation. But both can play that game. If both elites choose to free ride in expectation that the other one will not, then dictators gain free reign. Leaders can pursue personalization despite their elites' strength because they know coordination problems may keep elites from resisting.

Proposition 1. Regime members become less likely to resist as other members grow more powerful.

Model discussion

Some features of the model are worth noting. The first one is the absence of personalization as a strategic choice by the autocrat. Admittedly, dictators should be able to anticipate whether their power grab will be successful, which might constrain the outcomes that are an equilibrium. However, the mixed strategy equilibrium shows that, conditional on the dictator committing to the power grab, there is a possibility that they will succeed even under strong elites. The dictator may not know what the probability of that is but since it is a possibility then we should expect them to attempt the power grab with some positive probability even if doing so risks ouster by a strong elite. Ultimately, the goal of the model is not to offer a full account of when personalization occurs but to explain why personalization succeeds despite the presence of powerful elites.

I have focused on the multiple equilibria under $s_i^2 - \omega s_i < k < s_i^2$. These equilibria are useful because they do not offer a narrow prediction. The expectation is not that increased power sharing necessarily leads to personalization. We know empirically that this is not true. In some cases, strong elites fail to coordinate but not always. That makes this set of equilibria useful: they provide an explanation for the range of outcomes we observe.

Importantly, the model presented is agnostic about the substantive preferences of the elite. Past research has documented how contrasting interests within the ruling coalition can lead to breakdowns in cooperation (Collins, 2006; Geddes et al., 2018; Kaire, 2026). The present model shows that these conflicting preferences are not necessary for dictators to find opportunities to monopolize power. It is sufficient for dictators to share significant power among more than one elite. Power sharing can sometimes protect elites against personalization, but it can also facilitate it.

Elite free riding in autocratic Mexico

To explore the empirical plausibility of the argument, this section turns to a qualitative case study of Mexico during the twentieth century. The goal is to assess the verisimilitude of the theory, examining how elite actors responded to episodes of executive aggrandizement under different coalition structures. While the core claim—that the power of one elite can demobilize others—could be examined statistically, qualitative methods offer distinct advantages in this context. A quantitative strategy might, for example, test whether the dominant party is less likely to initiate a coup as the power of the military

increases. However, the same statistical relationship could emerge from different underlying mechanisms. The party's inaction could reflect the logic of elite free riding, but it could also be caused by factionalism. It could be that the party chooses not to mobilize because it fears that the military might side with the dictator. Both theories predict inaction under similar conditions, rendering them observationally equivalent in cross-national analyses. A qualitative approach, by contrast, allows for a more precise investigation of elite motivations when choosing to confront or acquiesce to the dictator's power grabs.

Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) offers a particularly useful setting for examining the dynamics of elite free riding. It is a canonical example of hegemonic party rule, where executive authority was embedded within a highly institutionalized ruling party. In such systems, the prevailing expectation is that personalization should be difficult to achieve. Strong ruling parties are thought to constrain leaders through internal hierarchies, succession norms, and collective decision-making processes (Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010; Slater, 2010). The PRI possessed all these characteristics, but despite this institutional robustness, presidential authority steadily grew over time, culminating in an executive that operated with remarkable autonomy from the party (Kaire, 2024). Mexico thus represents an unlikely case for personalization: elite constraints should have worked but they ultimately failed. This makes it a valuable case for investigating why strong elites sometimes prove unable to coordinate against authoritarian power grabs.

Moreover, the Mexican case is also useful in terms of causal identification. The early and late periods of the PRI that I will analyze serve as a controlled comparison. Throughout its tenure, the regime stayed the same but experienced significant variation in the key quantity of interest: size of the ruling coalition. The early years of the PRI were dominated by a few generals from the revolution. But, over time, the distribution of power shifted. Numerous actors outside the PRI—though still aligned with the regime—gained considerable influence. This expansion broadened the ruling coalition and extended the PRI's political reach, but it also undermined elite coordination. As more actors gained power, resistance to personalization became harder to sustain. Not because of factionalism—regime insiders had a history of cooperating to check the executive—but because the expectation of collective action encouraged free riding. Elites chose to stay on the sidelines, hoping others would bear the costs of resistance. But no one did.

Elite resistance under narrow power sharing

The PRI emerged as a response to the chronic instability that plagued Mexico before and after its revolution. A recurring cycle between one-man rule and weak governments made it evident to military leaders of the time that things needed to change. They designed the PRI as a mechanism to institutionalize the struggle for power. It incorporated the main revolutionary factions within the party and enforced a strict no reelection rule to secure long-term power sharing. Rather than allowing leaders to cling to power, the party would anoint a new presidential candidate every 6 years and ensure their victory through its electoral dominance. In this way, the PRI sought to constrain future leaders, channel elite ambitions, and maintain regime stability.

However, the PRI's power sharing pact did not immediately eliminate presidential ambition. In the early years of the regime, power sharing remained fragile and depended on elite mobilization for enforcement. This fragility was evident during the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946–1952). Alemán sought to consolidate power, beginning with a bureaucratic purge that removed old party cadres and replaced them with loyalists ([Servín, 1999](#)). Alemán further tested the limits of his authority when he maneuvered to secure a second term despite the no-re-election rule ([Gracida, 2004](#)). In response, a coalition of dissatisfied generals, led by [Henríquez Guzmán](#), broke with the PRI and mounted a substantive electoral challenge. Alemán's ambitions threatened to unravel the stability of the party and the broader regime.

Yet Alemán's attempts to concentrate power did not go unchallenged. His actions provoked significant resistance from within the ruling coalition, revealing the elite's capacity to mobilize. The president of the PRI, [Sánchez Taboada](#), threatened to implement primary elections—a move that would have curtailed the president's control over the nomination process. When this threat failed to deter Alemán, former president and revolutionary icon [Lázaro Cárdenas](#) broke with precedent and began to campaign in favor of his rival ([Villegas, 1975](#)). Even Alemán's political mentor, still loyal to him despite growing disillusionment, warned him in no uncertain terms: "your ambitions will cost you your life" ([Krauze, 1997](#), 128). Faced with unified opposition from powerful regime insiders, Alemán ultimately backed down from his efforts to extend his rule.

The pushback against Alemán's power grab illustrates the disciplining potential of a narrow ruling coalition. With political authority concentrated within the PRI, party elites understood that they were the only actors capable of enforcing the power sharing pact. If they failed to resist, no other elite

group could step in to constrain the president. Importantly, this configuration concentrated the capacity for resistance in a small number of actors, making inaction a risky strategy.

This situation changed over time. By the 1970s, the ruling coalition in Mexico had expanded to include large corporatist organizations, a growing business class, technocrats, and regional political bosses. This expansion did not weaken the elite's overall capacity to resist the president (Gandhi and Sumner, 2020; Wright, 2019). But it did distribute that capacity across multiple powerful actors (Kaire, 2024; Loeaza, 2010; Rodriguez Araujo, 1979). As a result, while the coalition remained strong, coordinated resistance became harder to sustain, opening the door to elite free riding and, ultimately, to a rebalance of power in favor of the executive.

Elite free riding under broad power sharing

The presidency of José López Portillo (1976–1982) shows how a bigger ruling coalition can struggle to leverage its power. His administration began under a cloud of illegitimacy: the election had been uncontested, with the main opposition parties withdrawing in protest, drawing attention to the undemocratic nature of the electoral process. Seeking to defuse criticism, he promptly implemented a political reform that would allow opposition parties to meaningfully compete in future elections. The reform was a significant step towards the country's political liberalization, but it was far from a harbinger of democratization (Becerra et al., 2000). The country did not democratize until many years later. Instead, the reform served as a vehicle for López Portillo to reassert and expand his control over party elites who had perceived his lack of legitimacy as an opportunity for increased autonomy (Castañeda, 2000; Lujambio, 2000).

The implications of the reform for the relationship between the executive and the party were clear to everyone. Party elites recognized that it would inevitably lead to the concentration of power within the executive, as it eventually did (Kaire, 2025). They voiced their concerns internally and, on occasion, publicly (Rodriguez Araujo, 1979). By bringing new political parties into the regime, the executive would be able to rely on them and to bypass resistance with the PRI. And this is in fact what occurred. Future presidents would recognize how the reform gave them tools to sideline PRI insiders they would not have had otherwise (De la Madrid, 2004). Given this, one might have expected that the PRI would have resisted the reform forcefully. But that did not happen. The changes to the electoral and party system passed quickly and with minimal internal opposition.

Two factors help explain why the PRI failed to oppose the political reform despite recognizing its potential to weaken the party's hold on power. First, open resistance would have been politically costly. The reform responded to mounting public demand for political liberalization following López Portillo's uncontested election and the growing perception among the public that violence was the best way to achieve political inclusion. In this context, blocking the reform risked provoking backlash at a moment when the regime's legitimacy was already under strain.

More importantly, PRI elites believed they did not need to be the ones to stop the reform. They expected their long-time allies in organized labor—particularly the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM)—to take the lead in defending the status quo (Molina, 1977). The CTM, the largest corporatist union in the country and the most powerful organization outside the party, had historically maintained a symbiotic relationship with the PRI (Haber, 2008; Trejo Delarbre, 1990). The two had often shielded each other from executive overreach, and the reform posed a threat to both. A weaker party would leave the CTM more exposed to presidential authority, something presidents have been keen to bring about in an effort to escape the CTM's influence (De la Madrid, 2004; López Portillo, 1988). From the PRI's perspective, the CTM had both the incentive and the organizational capacity to resist the initiative.

But the party overestimated the union's willingness to confront the president. Still recovering from a bruising conflict with López Portillo—who had tried and failed to democratize the CTM in response to pressure from independent labor movements—the union had little appetite for another showdown. Moreover, the threat of the reform was such a fundamental threat to the PRI elite that the union assumed there was little chance the PRI would not fight it (Brachet De Márquez, 1994; Estrada Castañón, 2004). Ultimately, both actors had good reasons to expect the other to mobilize, paradoxically leading them to choose inaction.

Crucially, this breakdown in resistance was not driven by elite infighting. The CTM was not seeking to exploit the PRI's weakness; on the contrary, its political future was bound up with the party's strength. A weakened PRI left the union vulnerable to marginalization by future presidents (De la Madrid, 2004). Instead, resistance failed because the presence of another powerful actor with aligned interests created an incentive to free ride. Opposing the reform would have been costly for both the PRI and the CTM, and each hoped the other would absorb the costs. In the end, this allowed presidents to centralize power in a manner that Alemán could not. What allowed for this to happen was not clever political maneuvering by the executive or

factionalism within the elite, but simply the strategic incentive to free ride that emerges as new powerful actors gain access to the ruling coalition.

The collapse of resistance cannot be attributed to elite weakness either. By the late 1970s, the PRI had expanded its organizational reach and capacity well past what Alemán had faced. Party leaders also no longer had to contend with the power, material and symbolic, of generals-turned-presidents. Likewise, the CTM had evolved into an organization powerful enough that presidents worried it could unseat them (Basagoiti, 2008, 165). While public opinion was certainly in favor of the political reform, and resisting it would have been costly, that had not held back the union or the party before. For example, López Portillo had broad public support when he pushed for the democratization of the CTM; and still, the corporatist union, with the explicit support of the PRI's leadership, coordinated a national strike that forced the president to relent. The PRI and the CTM had enough leverage over presidents to push against even their most popular policies, but, in this crucial instance, the power of each of them demobilized the other.

A second example of elite free riding came at the end of López Portillo's presidency, when he nationalized Mexico's private banking system. The nationalization transferred control over credit and capital allocation from private financial elites to the federal executive, bypassing both party institutions and established economic stakeholders. López Portillo himself presented the decision as a patriotic defense against capital flight and market sabotage, but he also recognized it as an opportunity to tame increasingly influential sectors of his ruling coalition, chiefly the nascent financial sector and the technocratic wing of the PRI (López Portillo 1988, 1248).

Importantly, neither of these two groups mounted effective resistance. Business interests preferred to avoid costly confrontation, fearing that they would not be able to survive potential reprisals if their resistance failed (Abedrop 2008). Moreover, business elites had good reason to expect technocrats within the PRI to resist such a dramatic assault on their political project. Technocrats had already become an influential faction within the state apparatus, committed to economic modernization and closer ties with capital (Babb, 2001; Centeno, 1997). But technocrats made a similar calculus. They did not want to challenge López Portillo, since doing so would have required allying themselves with the nationalist wing of the party and making concessions to them or some of the opposition parties (Granados Chapa, 2008). More importantly, they did not see the need to incur these costs since, from their perspective, the financial elite was guaranteed to fight the measure since it threatened their most basic source of influence: their control over credit to finance a government that was deeply in debt (Basagoiti, 2008). As each side deferred to the other, the president

successfully nationalized the banking system and marginalized the elites who depended on it for their political influence. In an effort to avoid the costs of resistance, powerful elites ended up opening the door to personalization even if they had the means to stop it.

Conclusions

Resisting the dictator in the context of strong elites is difficult because resistance functions as a public good for regime members. If one elite group successfully confronts the autocrat, all regime insiders benefit from a more constrained leader. But resisting is costly—it risks retaliation, marginalization, or even elimination. Elites would prefer to avoid those risks. In settings where only one elite actor has the capacity to push back, that actor knows that inaction means no one else will step in. But when multiple powerful groups exist—such as dominant parties, military cliques, or corporatist unions—each faces a strategic choice: resist and bear the cost, or wait and hope others act. The result is a classic collective action problem. The very presence of multiple potential veto players can paralyze resistance, enabling the dictator to centralize authority. Paradoxically, personalization can succeed not despite elite strength, but because of it.

The free riding mechanism developed here applies to authoritarian regimes in which multiple regime insiders possess the capacity to challenge the leader and where resistance to personalization can plausibly preserve existing power-sharing arrangements. It is less likely to operate in settings where elite capacity is highly concentrated in an elite group or where resistance may put the broader regime at risk. In such contexts, incentives to free ride would be weaker or not present. The argument is therefore not a general theory of elite behavior under dictatorship, but a conditional explanation of how personalization can advance in regimes that appear, on paper, well equipped to prevent it.

The free riding dynamic documented here problematizes a foundational assumption in the study of authoritarian politics: that power sharing naturally curbs autocratic excess. While earlier research has convincingly shown that power sharing can constrain dictators, this study shows how they can also unintentionally enable personalization. The difference lies in the structure of incentives. In some configurations, power-sharing institutions discipline the autocrat by facilitating elite cohesion and resistance. But in others, the diffusion of coercive and political capacity fosters free riding, where everyone waits for someone else to act. By highlighting this tension, the argument here helps bridge

the gap between a literature that sees power sharing as a force against personalization and a historical record with many examples of personalization under strong elites.

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Notes

1. I follow the literature in defining elites as strong if, collectively, they have the capacity to credibly threaten the dictator with ouster (Boix and Svolik, 2013; Myerson, 2008). This implies that the elite has access to power sharing institutions and share a common interest in constraining the dictator (Geddes et al., 2018; Gandhi and Sumner, 2020; Kaire, 2024).
2. Importantly, elite strength refers to capacity rather than certainty. Even dictators facing strong elites may find opportunities to personalize power. Such opportunities can arise for a variety of reasons, including changes in external conditions, shifts in institutional arrangements, or, as argued here, elite inaction driven by incentives to free ride on the expected resistance of others.
3. Kaire (2024) measures elite influence as the result of two distinct quantities. The first one is the extent of power sharing defined as access to institutionalized positions within the state. The second is elite cohesion defined as the number of distinct interests that have access to those institutions.

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