

1 *Introduction*

Throughout 2010, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan experienced a surge of social mobilization fueled by frustrations with the country's stagnating economy and political life. Growing numbers of workers were engaged in demonstrations and strikes (Christophersen 2013), while political parties staged protests against the country's electoral law following parliamentary elections in that November. As Jordan moved into 2011, these political and economic frustrations coalesced into weekly protests attended by thousands of demonstrators. Coinciding with the region-wide eruption of the Arab Spring uprisings, the protests were geographically dispersed and attracted a broad cross section of Jordanian society, including social groups that constituted a key part of the ruling monarchy's support coalition (Ryan 2018).

Nonetheless, the protests never escalated into a direct threat to the power of Jordan's autocratic king, Abdullah II. Though a small, radical fringe of demonstrators criticized the monarch, their message failed to resonate. Instead, the vast majority of protesters – and the public more broadly – directed their anger toward the prime minister, cabinet, and parliament while asking for the king to step in and correct the country's problems. Abdullah responded by dismissing the cabinet a few weeks after the weekly protests began, while also promising that subsequent governments would pursue political and economic reforms. These moves were welcomed by many Jordanians, and after a few months, the demonstrations had dissipated without the regime using significant repression and without ever posing a serious challenge to the monarchy.

In nearby Egypt, protests triggered by similar economic and political grievances to those in Jordan followed a very different trajectory. Egypt had also experienced a rise in political activism in 2010. When the young Egyptian man Khaled Said was brutally beaten to death by two low-level police officers in June of that year, anger had spread rapidly around the country. A Facebook page entitled “We Are All Khaled

Said” soon attracted hundreds of thousands of followers, and the page used this attention to advocate for reforming Egypt’s abusive security forces and tackling deeper structural problems related to poverty and corruption. As part of these efforts, the page made explicitly political demands on President Mubarak and his government. Though initially adopting a cautious approach that did not attack the autocratic president directly, the page linked Egypt’s persistent problems to the regime’s policies and advocated openly for term limits that would end Mubarak’s thirty-year presidency (Alaimo 2015).

As the Arab Spring uprisings began to spread across the Middle East in January 2011, the “We Are All Khaled Said” page reacted by escalating its demands against President Mubarak. After Tunisia’s president was overthrown in mid-January, the page’s founder, Wael Ghonim, quickly began to encourage Egyptians to mobilize against their president for his role in perpetuating Egypt’s many political and economic problems. It soon became clear that much of the country shared this opinion that the president was to blame for their grievances. Demonstrations began on Police Day and were ostensibly focused on police abuse, as well as frustrations with Egypt’s stagnant economy and repressive politics. But this issue-based anger coalesced into direct challenges to the president. Chants of “*irhal!*” (leave!) spread rapidly among the hundreds of thousands of protesters, who demanded that Mubarak resign for the country to move forward. As with King Abdullah in Jordan, the president responded in part by dismissing his cabinet and promising to usher in reforms alongside a new government. But this move did little to satisfy the crowds. Mass mobilizations targeting the president persisted for more than two weeks, outlasting the regime’s repression and eventually forcing Mubarak out of office amid joyous celebrations all over the country.

Similar divergences occurred across the region. In addition to Tunisia and Egypt, uprisings escalated in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, where demonstrators were determined to oust authoritarian presidents who had brutalized their people, crushed democratic aspirations, and looted their economies. Meanwhile, mass challenges to authoritarian rule barely materialized in the Middle East’s many monarchies. Royal rulers such as Abdullah did face protest movements of their own, some of which were quite large, and some of which pushed for significant reforms in their political systems. Large protest movements emerged in the monarchies of Morocco, Kuwait, and Bahrain, while Saudi

Arabia and Oman also experienced rare unrest. Yet only in Bahrain did a substantial part of the public eventually turn against the ruling monarch, and there only after the regime itself chose to escalate by turning to harsh repression against demonstrators calling for reforms (El Gamal 2014; Louer 2012). Across the monarchies, the vast majority of protesters called for holding elites accountable and implementing political and economic reforms that would leave the region's royals largely unscathed. This story repeated itself a decade later, when authoritarian presidents in Algeria and Sudan were overthrown by mass uprisings, whereas the Middle East's authoritarian kings continued to hang onto power while mostly avoiding serious popular opposition to their continuation on the throne.

Countries such as Jordan, Egypt, and most others in the Middle East are said to be governed by autocracies, or authoritarian regimes, because in such countries core civil liberties are absent and the most important political leaders are not selected through free elections. Sometimes these political leaders are monarchs, and in other cases, they may be presidents, party bosses, or military officers, but they share in common the acquisition of power without genuine electoral competition as well as the denial of political freedoms to the citizenry. However, despite the absence of free elections, popular politics can still be contentious and influential in these contexts, as during the Arab Spring uprisings. When the public makes their voices heard, why might anger focus on the autocrat in some cases, while targeting lower level officials in others? Existing research on authoritarian regimes emphasizes the importance of the regime's ability to repress and co-opt effectively to keep the masses from overthrowing the autocrat, but these explanations do not account all that well for the variation that occurred in the Middle East during this time. While some of the region's monarchies benefited from natural resource wealth that helped them to buy the public's loyalty, this advantage did not apply to Jordan or Morocco, where economic and social grievances closely resembled those of the Arab republics, and where kings were using similar co-optive strategies as presidents to distribute resources to their peoples (Blaydes 2010; Lust-Okar 2006; Owen 2012). In addition, the Arab republics all possessed extremely large coercive apparatuses, and arguably even more so than the monarchies, their police and security forces had extensive experience using violence against civilians.

What seemed to matter for the trajectory of protests in this moment was not so much the coercive and co-optive capacity of these regimes, but rather, the extent to which most demonstrators believed that the autocrats bore responsibility for their grievances. Protesters tended to blame their presidents but not monarchs for what was wrong in their countries; as a result, protesters in the republics wanted their presidents to be replaced, while protesters in the monarchies were more likely to be placated by the dismissal of ministers and parliaments. How is it possible that powerful autocrats, such as the Middle East's monarchs, might escape blame for their country's problems? After all, it may seem intuitive that the great powers of autocratic rulers would make them magnets for credit during good times but also focal points for blame when the people become dissatisfied. Influential academic work has assumed that authoritarian regimes struggle to avoid blame during moments of discontent (e.g., Weaver 1986), and this challenge often is apparent, as with the example of Egypt's Mubarak. Yet, in other cases such as Jordan, autocrats appear to be successful at shifting the public's attributions of responsibility for poor governance, convincing many of their citizens that they are not personally to blame and should therefore not be held accountable for the country's trials and tribulations. To the extent that enough people do not perceive the autocrat to be at fault, these powerful political figures should have less need to rely on repression to maintain control, and they should be less at risk of losing their power to mass uprisings like those of the Arab Spring.

How Mubarak and Abdullah responded to protests at this time also implies that autocrats recognize the importance of blame attributions and that they seek to shape these attributions strategically. As the depth of the public's anger became apparent across the Arab world, authoritarian rulers responded by trying to cast blame for their countries' problems on other political elites in their regimes. In Egypt, Jordan, and elsewhere, this approach was reflected in how rulers initially reacted to protests by dismissing their prime ministers and cabinets. Rotating these officials out of office constituted an attempt to convince the public that these officials bore responsibility for unpopular policy outcomes and were being held accountable for their mistakes. But this strategy worked better in some countries than others, strengthening Abdullah's political position in Jordan, while failing to protect Mubarak in Egypt.

This book advances two arguments that contribute to the understanding of why some autocrats are more successful than others at evading blame and retaining popular support, both in the Arab world and more generally among authoritarian regimes. The first argument is that how citizens in these political systems attribute responsibility is influenced by how credibly autocrats share decision-making powers with other political elites. The more the autocrat monopolizes the policy process, the more likely they are to be blamed by the public when outcomes turn out poorly. Alternatively, the more they delegate decision-making to ministers, members of parliament, or bureaucrats, the less likely they are to be viewed as the principal culprit when the people become dissatisfied, and the less likely their popularity is to decline. Furthermore, because autocrats have some capacity to shape the nature of power-sharing arrangements in their regimes, they can act strategically to influence the public's attributions by delegating more or less credibly over time and across different policy issues. Whether autocrats choose to empower other elites or not will influence their exposure to blame and thus their vulnerability to protests, as well as the dynamics of repression and accountability in their regimes. Returning to the Arab world, the region's monarchies had typically granted their cabinets and parliaments more influence over decision-making prior to the Arab Spring; as a result, their citizens were more likely than individuals living in the republics to accept that these actors, and not the autocrat, were at fault for their grievances. Because of these dynamics, the monarchies also responded to unrest with less severe repression and were able to provide a modicum of political accountability when they removed cabinet ministers and other officials from their positions.

The second argument articulated by this book sheds light on *why* autocratic monarchs were better positioned than autocratic presidents to avoid blame by sharing power. I claim that this variation is rooted in different institutional features of monarchies and republics. Monarchies are defined by the institutionalization of hereditary succession within a specific royal family, which establishes rigid standards about who can be the monarch while creating flexible expectations about how the monarch is involved in decision-making. This situation contrasts with republics, where anyone could – in theory – become the president, and where the president is supposed to govern for, and be held accountable by, the people. I argue these differences mean that

delegating power over the policy process is both safer for monarchs and more in line with norms about how responsibility is supposed to be attributed in the political system. These advantages increase the likelihood that a monarch will share power credibly with other political elites, and they also strengthen the effectiveness of this power sharing at protecting the monarch's reputation when governance turns out poorly. Again returning to the Arab world, the region's presidents delegated less credibly to minimize risks associated with internal challengers from their regimes; in addition, they struggled to overcome expectations that they would be deeply involved in decision-making and should therefore be held accountable for policy outcomes. Meanwhile, the region's monarchs had less reason to fear internal challenges from nonroyal elites to whom they delegated, and their delegation to these elites benefited from norms that emphasized the appropriateness of keeping the monarchy above the decision-making process. Thus, as discontent spread across the region, monarchs were less likely to absorb blame than their presidential counterparts, which facilitated their ability to outlast the unrest.

The book's arguments contribute to the understanding of why some autocrats are vulnerable to escalating opposition during periods of popular dissatisfaction, while others are able to maintain genuine support from much of the public even as their regimes perform poorly for extended periods of time. In exploring why monarchs are particularly well positioned to rely on delegation of decision-making responsibilities to protect their reputations, the book also sheds light on monarchy as an understudied but highly stable type of modern authoritarian rule. The remainder of this chapter discusses why it is important to study the factors that shape popular support for autocratic rulers, summarizes the primary arguments in more detail, and expands on how the book develops our understanding of the politics of authoritarian governance.

1.1 Governance and the Public in Authoritarian Regimes

Saddam Hussein was Iraq's president for more than two decades, from 1979 to 2003. From the beginning, his rule was defined by ironfisted brutality. Less than a week after he forced his predecessor to resign and assumed the presidency, Hussein convened an assembly of the ruling Ba'ath Party and proceeded to denounce dozens of its leading members as traitors. Hundreds of the party's elites were soon detained

and executed. In the years that followed, Hussein would subject tens of thousands more of his country's citizens to state violence, whether rebellious Kurds, protesting Shi'a, dissident Sunnis, or any political elite who might plausibly pose a threat to his dominance of the political system (Blaydes 2018). Ruling through fear and with no one to challenge him, Hussein's unconstrained power left him free to pursue what policies he wanted, often with disastrous results. Most egregiously, the Iran–Iraq War that he started devastated the country during the 1980s, his invasion of Kuwait only made the situation worse in the 1990s, and his nonchalant response to the threat of invasion by the United States in 2003 ultimately proved his undoing.

In many ways, the presidency of Saddam Hussein reflects common assumptions about what authoritarianism is and how it works. In this view, authoritarianism means governance through brutality by an unconstrained and unpopular dictator, which breeds instability and ultimately ends violently. This trajectory certainly captures the truth in some cases, but the reality of authoritarian politics is far more complex. As mentioned earlier, authoritarianism (which I will also refer to as autocracy) is defined by the lack of basic civil liberties and the absence of free and fair elections for key decision-makers in the executive and legislative branches, and this broad definition captures an immense amount of variation in both how these regimes govern and the outcomes their governance produces.

For example, while some autocracies are controlled by single parties as in China, many others are governed by hegemonic parties that maintain their power through unfair elections like Putin's regime in Russia, and still others are led by monarchs, military juntas, or charismatic strongmen (Geddes et al. 2014; Magaloni et al. 2013; Wahman et al. 2013). In terms of outcomes, there are autocracies like the Kuwaiti monarchy that have survived for decades, and their stability aligns with high levels of economic development and relatively liberal political spheres. There also exist autocracies like Saddam Hussein's Iraq or Syria under the al-Asad family, which hold onto power for long periods of time while persistently mismanaging their countries' economies and resorting to extreme violence against the public. Alternatively, many autocrats, as well as the regimes they lead, survive in power for only a handful of years (Geddes et al. 2014), and this instability often breeds dire social and economic consequences. For instance, prior to the emergence of dominance by the al-Asads, Syria experienced ten

coups between 1950 and 1970 (Powell and Thyne 2011), as autocrats were repeatedly overthrown by their political rivals.

Understanding this variation across authoritarian regimes is not just useful as a scholarly exercise but remains highly relevant to the contemporary world. Temporarily, as dozens of new democracies emerged between the 1970s and the 1990s, authoritarianism seemed on its way to becoming a historical relic. But two decades later, this trend had reversed. Many authoritarian regimes survived this third wave of democratization and continue to thrive; furthermore, even some mature democracies have begun to decay and are struggling to maintain their system of competitive elections. By 2020, a majority of the world's political systems had become authoritarian again for the first time since 2001 (Luhmann et al. 2020), illustrating the persistent relevance of authoritarianism to global politics.

The academic literature on authoritarianism has become increasingly sophisticated and provides a number of insights into variation across these regimes. An important component of this research focuses on institutional configurations within autocracies and their effects on governance. Saddam Hussein's brutal dominance of Iraq may reflect the archetype of a dictator for many people, but, in fact, autocrats – who I define as the most powerful individual in an authoritarian regime – often face significant political constraints from other institutions in their political systems (Magaloni 2008; Meng 2020). Institutions ranging from parliaments and cabinets to courts and the military can exercise political influence and limit the dominance of the autocrat. As one example, Mexican presidents under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) regime were constrained by their party and consistently left office after a single six-year term (Magaloni 2006). Research suggests that authoritarian regimes in which autocrats face more constraints on their power tend to perform better economically (Wright 2008), in part because policymaking is less capricious, corrupt, and unstable (North and Weingast 1989). Likewise, these regimes are also less repressive on average, perhaps because the autocrat has less capacity to direct the security forces for their own ends (Frantz et al. 2020).

Institutions also have implications for the stability of authoritarian rule, as they can help autocrats to manage potential threats to their power. In thinking about where challenges to autocrats come from, scholars distinguish between threats that autocrats face from other

political elites in their regimes and threats they face from below as the public mobilizes against them (Svolik 2012). Regarding the former, even the most powerful autocrats do not rule alone; instead, they depend on elite allies to both take and then keep power (Haber 2008). However, by virtue of their own influence in the political system, these elites are often well positioned to overthrow and replace the autocrat through a coup d'état (Magaloni 2008), and most autocrats do lose power in this way (Svolik 2012). As a result, surviving in office means figuring out how to share power with elites to incentivize their loyalty. Institutions such as legislatures, parties, and cabinets can play an important role here, especially if they are relatively strong (Meng 2020). For example, holding a seat in the legislature may give elites access to rents and status, as well as influence over policy decisions (Blaydes 2010; Gandhi 2008; Truex 2014). Institutions can also enable elites to monitor the autocrat more effectively, increasing the credibility of power-sharing arrangements by making it easier to observe if the autocrat is trying to seize more power for themselves (Boix and Svolik 2013).

Regarding threats from below, autocrats also need to take the public into account as they try to hold onto power. Mass uprisings can trigger their downfall directly (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014), as illustrated by the Arab Spring uprisings or the string of Colour Revolutions before them. Despite the absence of free and fair elections, many autocrats also hold manipulated elections, and sometimes they miscalculate and get voted out of office. In addition, evidence of popular opposition to the autocrat can motivate efforts by elites to seize power themselves (Casper and Tyson 2014). As a result, if autocrats want to stay in power, they need to have strategies for controlling their countries' citizens. Institutions can be helpful here as well. Legislatures, parties, and elections provide opportunities for short-term payments through vote buying, as well as sustained financial rents via patronage (Lust-Okar 2006; Magaloni 2006; Ross 2001). Such institutions can also offer limited representation of constituents' policy preferences (Gandhi 2008; Malesky and Schuler 2011; Truex 2016), or responsiveness to citizens' complaints (Lueders 2022).

However, though it has long been recognized that "the people" matter for the stability of authoritarian regimes, research on popular support for these regimes is underdeveloped (Carter and Carter 2023; Przeworski 2023), and the literature has tended to privilege the politics

of elites over the politics of the masses (Magaloni and Wallace 2008). It is often assumed that autocrats must be unpopular, that they use repression to keep the people under control, and that what support they have is based on material transactions and is therefore fundamentally unstable (Przeworski 2023). Certainly repression is a central component of controlling the public in authoritarian regimes (Albertus and Menaldo 2012; Bellin 2004; Blaydes 2018; Greitens 2016; Levitsky and Way 2010). Fear of repression understandably keeps most citizens of autocracies out of politics, and they often either lack well-formed political views or hide their beliefs as a result. Nonetheless, even though many people falsify their preferences in these contexts, it remains the case that their genuine attitudes and beliefs can matter a great deal for their countries' trajectories, particularly during moments when repressive or co-optive capacity are shaken by exogenous shocks or internal crises (Kuran 1991). At the same time, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that many autocrats are genuinely popular with their people for reasons that go well beyond the receipt of patronage from the regime (e.g., Frye et al. 2017; Huang et al. 2022). In fact, even Saddam Hussein appears to have benefited from substantial popular support during certain periods of his rule (Blaydes 2018). Yet, our understanding of popular politics in authoritarian regimes continues to be relatively underdeveloped, especially when compared to what is known about democracies. The masses remain a mechanistic actor in many theories of authoritarianism, with blackboxed preferences that say relatively little about how people think and act under autocratic rule (Williamson and Magaloni 2020).

One area in which this absence is visible is in understanding how people living under authoritarian regimes perceive the distribution of power in their political systems, and how these views shape the ways in which they think about responsibility and accountability. Generally speaking, people hold preferences for certain policies or outcomes to be provided by their governments and they want to reward political leaders who deliver while holding accountable those who fail to deliver. For this accountability to take place, the public needs to figure out who in the political system is responsible for decision-making and therefore who should receive credit for good outcomes or blame for bad ones (Hood 2014). These attributions of responsibility are highly relevant to most political leaders. Whether they receive credit or blame has

major implications for their popularity. As might be expected, receiving credit tends to increase public approval, while being blamed tends to decrease it even more (Weaver 1986). Attributions also have implications for collective action: When people have a clear target to blame, they are more likely to protest (Javeline 2003a, 2003b). In other words, how people assign attributions of responsibility for political and policy outcomes has implications for the intensity of opposition a leader is likely to face and whether that opposition escalates into mobilization. These dynamics should also be important for authoritarian regimes, but we know relatively little about how people attribute responsibility in these contexts.

Because the consequences of attributions can be so important for their ability to survive in office, political leaders tend to work hard at shaping how the public thinks about responsibility. Such efforts can be symbolic or rhetorical, but they can also spill over directly into how leaders structure decision-making processes or the implementation of policies (Hood 2011). While some research studies from autocratic contexts suggests that authoritarian regimes take attributions of credit and blame into account in how they approach policymaking (e.g., Cai 2008; Schuler 2020), the academic literature has largely overlooked whether and how autocrats strategically approach decision-making in an effort to manage the public's ideas about responsibility in the political system. This absence reflects another, broader issue with the study of authoritarian politics, where the focus on how regimes survive has overshadowed attention to how these regimes actually govern. It remains common to assume that the autocrat makes most important decisions, while other elites play somewhat marginal roles in steering the state's policies. These dynamics reflect an abstracted version of reality for many authoritarian regimes, but decision-making processes also remain highly complex in these political systems, and there is substantial variation in the extent to which autocrats dominate the policy process. Part of the reason for the muted focus on these issues can be explained by data scarcity, since the opacity of authoritarian regimes makes it difficult to study their internal politics rigorously with either qualitative or quantitative social science methods (Gandhi et al. 2020). In recent years, scholars have increasingly used creative solutions to acquire data on authoritarian governance, producing insights into topics ranging from bargaining between executive and legislative branches (Noble 2020) to the dynamics of lobbying (Lü et al. 2020).

Nonetheless, there remains much to be learned in terms of how autocracies make decisions and govern the societies they control.

1.2 Attributions of Responsibility under Authoritarianism

This book addresses the political dynamics surrounding attributions of responsibility – how people assign credit and blame, and how political leaders try to manipulate this process – to advance our knowledge of both popular politics and governance under authoritarianism. The underlying assumption of this study is that people try to understand who is responsible for policy outcomes they like or dislike, because they care about holding political leaders accountable. Political leaders receive “credit” when responsibility is attributed to them for positive outcomes, and they receive “blame” when responsibility is attributed to them for negative outcomes. As discussed earlier, these attributions can have direct and large consequences for the intensity of opposition faced by political leaders. How, then, might autocrats try to manage the public’s attributions of responsibility? In general, two classes of strategies are available to political leaders. The first involves the use of *messaging* to advance claims of credit or to deny being at fault, while the second focuses on using *institutions* to influence who wields actual responsibility for decision-making, thus directing attributions toward that person.

In an authoritarian context, messaging strategies – that is, propaganda – are undoubtedly important for shaping how the public thinks about responsibility. The high degree of control over the media makes it relatively easy for most autocrats to distribute their message, and this propaganda can often be effective at influencing mass attitudes (e.g., Adena et al. 2015; Carter and Carter 2023; Stockmann 2013; Williamson and Malik 2021). Researchers have shown how propaganda is used explicitly to grant credit to the autocrat while assigning blame to others. For instance, Rozenas and Stukal (2019) document how the Russian media attributes good economic outcomes to President Putin while attributing negative outcomes to lower-level government officials or foreign actors. Similarly, Lu (2014) finds that social reforms increase trust in the Chinese central government but not local governments, because the media credits the former but not the latter with good policy outcomes. Aytaç (2021) also demonstrates that President Erdogan in Turkey appears capable of minimizing the risks of

blame for poor economic performance by using propaganda to change the country's political agenda.

This research has been important for understanding attributions of responsibility in authoritarian regimes, but propaganda is not the whole story for explaining how people think about politics in these contexts, including when it comes to attributing blame and credit. Consider again the example of Egypt's Mubarak, who tried to deflate the mass uprising in 2011 in part by suggesting that his ministers were the ones at fault, while also propagating the narrative of a "plot" against the country. Such claims were dismissed by the protesters, who perceived that, "ultimately in Egypt, the power lies with the president" (Al-Jazeera 2011). Propaganda is not always persuasive (Huang 2015), and it becomes less persuasive as its claims diverge more substantially from reality (Carter and Carter 2023; Rosenfeld 2018). When it comes to perceptions of responsibility, an authoritarian regime's messaging may assert consistently that the autocrat is not at fault, but these claims should be less likely to affect how the public attributes blame in cases where the autocrat does in fact dominate decision-making.

This book moves beyond messaging and propaganda to consider how the distribution of power across governance institutions affects the politics of attributions in autocracies. In this framework, political leaders face a trade-off in their ability to claim credit or avoid blame. This trade-off is shaped by the extent of their control over decision-making. The more direct their control, the more likely they are to receive credit when outcomes prove popular, but the more likely they are to attract blame when they turn out poorly instead. By contrast, when decision-making responsibilities are delegated to others or spread across multiple institutions, the political leader will be positioned less well to claim credit but will also be more insulated from blame. This trade-off occurs because people make attributions based, in part, on their perceptions of who held power over a decision and its implementation (Alicke 2000; Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor 2008; Weiner 1985). Research from a variety of contexts supports this idea. Whether in experimental settings (Bartling and Fischbacher 2012), corporations (Boeker 1992), or politics at the local, national, and international levels (Boyne 2008; Ellis 1994; Gulzar and Pasquale 2017; Hobolt et al. 2012; Martin and Raffler 2021; Tavits 2007; Williamson 2024), individuals who exercise less control over decision-making are less likely to reap the credit but also more likely to avoid the blame for subsequent

outcomes. As will be discussed further in the next chapter, research suggests that political leaders are more likely to prioritize blame avoidance over credit claiming when they face a trade-off between the two, and I argue that this emphasis on minimizing exposure to blame should be particularly relevant to autocrats. As a result, this book will focus more so on how people living under authoritarianism attribute blame and how autocrats try to avoid blame, though it will give some attention to credit claiming as well.

But is it actually possible for autocrats to use institutional strategies to shift blame away from themselves? The typical portrayal of authoritarian regimes as those in which autocrats are all-powerful and their regimes are highly centralized would suggest they should find it easy to claim credit but also extremely difficult to avoid blame (Weaver 1986). Thus, when outcomes turn out poorly and the public is aggrieved, the autocrat should have no choice but to rely on repression, since they will otherwise become the target of mass opposition. Perhaps for this reason, most existing research on institutional strategies for managing attributions of credit and blame has focused on democratic political systems (Baekkeskov and Rubin 2016). Democracies may seem like the natural environment in which to study these dynamics, given their free-wheeling elite politics and divided institutions that enable political games over credit claiming and blame shifting. Meanwhile, institutional strategies may seem less relevant to the politics of blame in authoritarian regimes.

In fact, numerous examples suggest that autocrats are often quite effective at evading blame through institutional strategies, such that it frequently falls instead on the political elites with whom they share power. President Putin of Russia provides one illustrative case, at least prior to his decision to invade Ukraine in 2022. Putin was long described as a “Teflon” politician, since his approval tended to remain higher than support for his party or other regime elites, even during periods of significant economic and political disruption (Volkov 2015). In part, this greater popularity almost certainly reflected the effects of propaganda, as well as some degree of preference falsification to avoid repression. But several scholars of Russian politics suggest that much of Putin’s popular support during his first two decades in power was genuine (e.g. Frye et al. 2017). One reason for his success at sustaining high levels of public approval may have been his efforts to distance himself from decision-making for many issues that affected Russians

in their daily lives. Ministers, members of parliament, and regional governors all held power over policymaking in an authoritarian system in which Putin was predominant but not omnipotent. In fact, the president would make a show of stepping in to “fix” problems created by lower-level officials after they were brought to his attention by disgruntled citizens.

Most modern autocracies are similar. The autocrat is powerful and capable of pushing through their preferences in most cases, but they do not fully control decision-making within the political system. Instead, decision-making powers are delegated to other political elites through their positions in ministries, the parliament, or the bureaucracy (Magaloni 2008; Meng 2020; Svoboda 2012). One of the core claims of this book is that these power-sharing arrangements are observed by the public and then affect how citizens attribute responsibility. As the autocrat monopolizes power more fully, they will find it easier to convince the public they deserve credit, but harder to convince the public they should not be blamed. Alternatively, as power is shared more widely with other elites across the country’s political institutions, making it more credible that the autocrat is not steering every major decision personally, the autocrat will receive less credit but will find it easier to persuade people they are not at fault when something goes wrong. Throughout the book, I will refer interchangeably to power sharing over policymaking as “delegation,” reflecting the provision of decision-making powers to political elites other than the autocrat.

This relationship between delegation and attributions can help to answer the question of why some autocrats are more likely to become the targets of mass opposition than others during periods of discontent, as with the Arab Spring. Consider an authoritarian regime where the autocratic president delegates substantial decision-making powers to the prime minister. Particularly since repression makes protests risky in authoritarian regimes, people who believe the prime minister is more at fault for their grievances than the president are unlikely to take to the streets for a demonstration that openly targets the president. In addition, even people who believe the president is to blame may not be willing to join such a protest if they believe that many *other* citizens perceive the prime minister as responsible and will not turn out to protest against the president. Alternatively, if the autocratic president monopolizes power in such a way that their responsibility is clear for all to see, people should be more likely to want to protest against the

president directly, and they should also be more likely to believe that their fellow citizens will join them in large numbers. In other words, the extent to which the autocrat shares decision-making powers with other elites should influence the likelihood that disgruntled citizens coordinate against them when expressing their anger publicly.

Because autocrats often have some ability to shape their country's political institutions (Magaloni 2006), another central claim of the book is that autocrats will strategically alter the credibility of power sharing with the public's attributions in mind. With regards to credibility, I am referring to how costly it would be for the autocrat to force through their own preferences in the decision-making process. As these costs increase because the powers of other elites make it harder for the autocrat to get their way, the public should perceive delegation to be more credible, and they should be more likely to accept the autocrat is not dominating all decisions and should not be blamed for poor outcomes. However, this increased credibility comes with a trade-off, as it may also improve the ability of elites to threaten and potentially replace the autocrat (Paine 2021, 2022). This increased coup risk can occur because more credible power sharing may strengthen the ability of elites to claim credit and win over the public, and because it increases their access to networks and resources that can be turned to their own benefit (Meng 2020). Thus, in deciding how credibly to share power over decision-making, autocrats will weigh the costs of potential blame against the risks of delegating too much influence to other elites. This trade-off implies that autocrats should be more likely to delegate decision-making powers credibly during time periods and for issue domains in which they are relatively more concerned about the consequences of being blamed by a dissatisfied public. By contrast, they should be more likely to rein in elites' decision-making influence and accept the risks of being blamed where threats from internal challenges become too great.

In cases where the autocrat fears becoming the target of public unrest and it is not too costly for the autocrat to delegate credibly, it should be possible for autocrats to share decision-making powers in a way that facilitates an equilibrium of regime stability. In this equilibrium, the autocrat delegates credibly to other political elites, who have the opportunity to influence policies and steer them toward their own preferences. If the public dislikes the policies, they blame and then mobilize against the elites instead of the autocrat, and the autocrat removes

the elites from their positions in response to the public's demands. By removing the elites and providing a modicum of accountability to the public, the autocrat may even strengthen their reputation and bolster their popular support. Thus, the elites get to set the policy, the public gets accountability if they are unhappy with the decision, and the autocrat is able to stay in power without resorting to extreme repression. This equilibrium also highlights how the relationship between attributions and institutions in authoritarian regimes can facilitate understanding of how decisions are made, when opposition does or does not escalate, and how limited accountability can function in these contexts.

1.3 The King Can Do No Wrong

The relationship I have described between attributions of responsibility and delegation of decision-making powers should apply to authoritarian regimes generally. But are certain autocrats more likely than others to benefit from delegation as a blame avoidance strategy? As explained earlier, sharing power over decision-making is not risk-free for autocrats, and delegating too much influence to other political elites may empower them to challenge the autocrat from within the regime. It follows that in contexts where delegation is less likely to strengthen elites dangerously, the autocrat should be able to share decision-making powers more credibly, and their reputation should be more protected from popular anger as a result.

At the same time, research on attributions suggests that the effectiveness of delegation as a blame avoidance strategy is constrained by norms about who is *supposed* to take responsibility for governance outcomes. People expect some leaders or institutions to be accountable for decision-making more than others, which may motivate them to blame these leaders for unpopular outcomes even in cases where the decisions were delegated credibly to others (Arceneaux 2006; Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Hood 2011). Consider the United States, where President Harry Truman popularized the saying that “the buck stops here,” by which he meant that he was ultimately responsible for any outcome produced by the sprawling US government. Expectations about who is responsible can take root in a society through numerous channels. Constitutions often define the officials who are meant to be responsible for setting the policy agenda and accountable for the outcomes it produces. Likewise, schools often teach their students

an idealized version of how their country's policy process operates and who is meant to make decisions. If those expectations fall on the position held by the autocrat, they should create a limiting factor on delegation's ability to facilitate blame avoidance. As a result, understanding how these norms vary across different types of authoritarian regimes can help to explain why some autocrats may be better positioned to protect their reputations by delegating decision-making powers to other political elites.

The second major argument of this book is that ruling monarchs possess advantages on both fronts compared to other autocratic rulers in the modern world. First, delegation is less costly for monarchs on average. And second, delegation also aligns more closely with norms about how responsibility should be attributed in the political system. As a result, delegation is both *safer* and *more effective* at shifting blame for monarchs. These advantages make them especially well-positioned to escape blame by sharing power with institutions such as cabinets and legislatures.

This book focuses on ruling monarchies, which refers to a type of authoritarian regime in which decision-making power is held by an autocrat – the monarch – who (1) is selected on the basis of hereditary succession to rule for life and (2) holds a royal title as part of a pre-defined royal family. This combination of institutionalized hereditary succession and royal titles reflects the standard approach to defining monarchy both in popular understanding and in the academic literature (Cheibub et al. 2010; Geddes et al. 2014; Gerring et al. 2021; Magaloni et al. 2013). Importantly, this definition does not include ceremonial monarchies where the ruling family has been stripped of decision-making power, often in democracies such as Spain's where the cabinet and parliament govern, but sometimes in other authoritarian regimes where the monarch becomes a figurehead. In short, for our purposes, the monarch must actually rule. This definition also excludes the relatively few authoritarian regimes – for instance, Syria and North Korea – in which hereditary succession does occur, but the autocrat continues to hold a nonroyal title linked to republican ideas and institutions. This distinction is important because it creates different formal rules about who can hold power legitimately, as well as different expectations about the autocrat's governance role.

For centuries, ruling monarchies were the most common type of regime in the world (Gerring et al. 2021). Gradually during the

nineteenth century and then more rapidly during the twentieth century, they were replaced by republican political systems – either democratic or authoritarian – or by democratic, constitutional monarchies in which monarchs no longer governed (Stepan et al. 2014). As of 2021, ruling monarchies continued to exist in ten countries: Bahrain, Brunei, Eswatini, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The monarch also still plays an influential governance role in Thailand’s often-authoritarian political system, and the monarch of Bhutan could arguably still be classified as an autocrat. Since 1945, authoritarian monarchs also governed for some period of time in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burundi, Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, the Maldives, Nepal, Tonga, and Yemen. While these lists are relatively short, they include some of the world’s most politically and economically influential countries, several of which punch above their weight when considering their small populations.

The survival of these regimes well into the modern period reflects something of a puzzle. Writing in the late 1960s, the prominent political scientist Samuel Huntington predicted that ruling monarchs would struggle to manage the difficulties of modernization and would soon disappear, whether they were overthrown by revolution or relegated to the ceremonial status of constitutional monarchs (Huntington 1968). More than two decades later, the esteemed Middle East scholar Lisa Anderson (1991) observed that Huntington’s prediction had not yet borne fruit, particularly in the Arab world. She argued instead that the centralized authority and flexible ideology of ruling monarchs actually made them effective modernizers, relative to other types of rulers. But Anderson also speculated that kings would struggle to manage demands for popular sovereignty in a democratic age. In the three decades since Anderson’s article was published, however, only a single ruling monarchy – that of Nepal – has lost power following a challenge from its citizens. In fact, several datasets of authoritarian regimes indicate that monarchies have been the most stable type of autocracy in the modern period, surviving more than 40 years on average (Geddes et al. 2014; Magaloni et al. 2013; Cheibub et al. 2010).¹ Given this surprising resiliency, the practical importance of those states that continue

¹ See the chapter appendix for a plot of regime duration by authoritarian regime type across these three datasets.

to be governed by royal autocrats, and the fact that ruling monarchies have been the most common type of political system historically, understanding how these regimes govern and why they tend to be stable should be of general and academic interest. Nonetheless, monarchies have received relatively little attention from political scientists and other researchers (Gerring et al. 2021; Stepan et al. 2014).

If monarchs are better-positioned than other autocrats to avoid blame through delegation, they should be more effective at protecting their popular support, which should contribute to the greater stability of their regimes. I argue that this advantage occurs because of different political dynamics created by hereditary succession and popular sovereignty. As discussed earlier, hereditary succession is the principle that underlies leader selection in monarchies. By contrast, popular sovereignty – the idea that governments derive their power from the people they govern – is the key principle that informs leader selection in most modern political systems, whether they are authoritarian or democratic in actual practice (Murphy 2022). Why does this difference matter? Compared to popular sovereignty, hereditary succession lowers the costs of credible delegation by creating relative *rigidity* in the rules defining who should be the ruler, while contributing to relative *flexibility* in expectations about their decision-making responsibilities. As a result, monarchs can share power more credibly with less risk to themselves, and this delegation should also be relatively more effective at protecting them from blame.

To summarize the argument in more detail, hereditary succession means that only people within the royal family can become the monarch legally. As such, any nonroyal elite to whom the monarch delegates, and who wishes to become the autocrat themselves, will have to pursue the costly option of overthrowing the entire royal regime and replacing it with a completely new one. Of course, such coups have happened historically: for instance, military officers ousted kings in Egypt and Iraq and replaced them with republics in the 1950s. But these actions are highly risky and often end poorly for the perpetrators. On the other hand, when popular sovereignty is the principle of leader selection, any citizen of the country with enough support could in theory become the legitimate autocrat. Thus, any elite could use their influence to replace the autocrat without necessarily subverting the existing rules of the political system, which tends to be a less risky and less costly approach to ruler change, even in authoritarian

regimes (Lucardi 2019). In Tunisia, for instance, Ben Ali used his positions as interior minister and then prime minister to mount a bloodless constitutional coup against the aging autocrat President Bourguiba. Many other autocrats have been removed through similar means, or even through elections contested by their elite opponents (Geddes et al. 2014). As a result of these higher costs to challenging them, monarchs should be able to give other elites credible influence over the decision-making process without having to worry as much about the threat such delegation poses to their hold on power.

Regarding expectations of responsibility and the influence of those expectations on the effectiveness of delegation as a blame avoidance strategy, popular sovereignty implies that the ruler is meant to govern for the people and will lack a legitimate claim to govern if they lose the people's support. This expectation often applies to presidents specifically – the most common type of nonroyal autocrat – and it is often codified constitutionally. In Egypt, for example, the 2014 constitution states that the president “defends the interests of the people” (Constitution of Egypt, Article 139), while also noting that “The President of the Republic, jointly with the Cabinet, sets the general policy of the state and oversees its implementation as set out by the Constitution” (Constitution of Egypt, Article 150). In other words, the president is supposed to act on the public's desires by setting the state's policies. In contrast, hereditary succession has no such implications about the monarch's role in governance. The king is the rightful ruler whether they micromanage all policy decisions or make no policy decisions at all, merely because they are from the right family. In fact, monarchs often face an expectation that they will not be held accountable for decisions of the state, because the king, as the sovereign, can do no wrong. Instead, the cabinet ministers and parliament are supposed to be the institutions that represent the people and take responsibility for decision-making.

This idea of ministerial responsibility evolved out of the British experience with kingship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as parliament wrestled with how to constrain the monarchy while also recognizing its sovereign role. Gradually, ministers took on more power so that they – and not the king or queen – would be responsible and therefore accountable for governance problems that arose (Bogdanor 1995). Ministerial responsibility quickly became the norm for constitutional monarchies, whose constitutions often stated

explicitly that the king could do no wrong and that ministers would be accountable for the state's policies. In ruling monarchies, this principle does not mean the disappearance of the king's political role, as it eventually did in the United Kingdom. But it does suggest that an expectation exists by which the monarch is meant to be distant from many of the decisions of day-to-day governance, while the cabinet and parliament are meant to be responsible instead. Thus, delegation by monarchs should align more closely with the public's understanding of who is *supposed* to be blamed when things go wrong, making it a relatively more effective blame avoidance strategy for monarchs compared to other types of autocrats.

This argument is a relative argument about how authoritarian monarchies compare to other types of authoritarian regimes. Those other regimes are largely the product of the shift toward ideas and institutions of popular sovereignty that occurred in the past few centuries. Part of the monarch's delegation advantage is rooted in this shift, which led to the development of expectations about the separation of monarchs and responsibility for governance. In terms of scope conditions, then, the argument is most relevant to our understanding of politics more recently.

It is also important to emphasize that the argument does not imply that modern monarchs will never be blamed or will never face mass opposition. Neither does it mean that all monarchs will choose to delegate in the first place. Many royal rulers of the past few hundred years have decided to monopolize decision-making in their political systems – a dynamic that should help us to understand which monarchies collapsed and which monarchies survived into the modern world. Finally, the argument also does not mean that delegation by ruling monarchs equates to constitutional monarchy as it exists in the democracies of the United Kingdom or Sweden. Kings in Jordan, Morocco, and elsewhere are still autocrats with immense powers and substantial political influence. Nonetheless, this argument does suggest that autocratic monarchs who share power over the decision-making process should be relatively effective at protecting themselves from popular anger. This protection should reduce the likelihood of mass uprisings that seek to overthrow the autocrat, since the public will direct their fury at other political actors without demanding that the regime be overthrown entirely. In turn, this ability to shift blame should

facilitate accountability, limit the need for repression, and indirectly reduce threats from other elites even further.

1.4 Contributions of the Book

1.4.1 Understanding Autocracies Generally

This book contributes to knowledge of authoritarian politics in several ways. First and most directly, the book sheds light on a universal political issue – how people attribute responsibility for governance – that has received relatively little attention in autocracies. To date, only a handful of existing studies speak to the relationship between attributions of responsibility and power sharing in these settings. Beazer and Reuter (2019) demonstrate that decentralization enables Russia's ruling party to mitigate electoral punishment for poor performance, while Rosenfeld (2018) shows that Russians are more likely to punish the ruling party for poor performance in regions where its political dominance is more pronounced. Both studies are consistent with the idea that more credible power sharing can facilitate blame avoidance in authoritarian contexts. Research on China (Cai 2008) and Vietnam (Schuler 2020) also suggests that autocrats consider blame in how they approach the policy process. While important, these studies do not directly address the autocrat's exposure to attributions, whether and why these effects may vary temporally, by issue, and across countries, or the manner in which concerns about blame shape strategic interactions between autocrats, other political elites, and the public. My book addresses each of these topics in turn.

The book shows that people living in authoritarian regimes hold relatively complex and nuanced views about how responsibility operates in their political systems. They do not inherently blame the autocrat for all that goes wrong, but neither do they accept the propaganda of the autocrat's infallibility. Instead, many people will attribute responsibility to other elites in important political and bureaucratic positions, recognizing that they often wield substantial influence over the direction of specific policies. At the same time, these attributions vary based on the extent of the autocrat's actual control over the decision-making process. I provide evidence that the more the autocrat concentrates power in their own hands, the more they attract credit but the more

they also expose themselves to blame. By contrast, the more credibly they delegate, the less they are blamed at the expense of losing some credit. In other words, the public has some capacity to evaluate objectively how power operates in many authoritarian political systems, and attributions shift as the situation changes, with implications for the stability of these regimes during periods of crisis or poor governance. This dynamic illustrates the importance of engaging with public opinion in authoritarian settings with more complexity, moving beyond binary distinctions that emphasize support for and opposition to the regime, or the predominant focus on how people are bought off or made to fear the authorities.

Along these lines, the book contributes to understanding of “popular” autocrats. Political scientists have often debated whether certain autocrats really do have the high levels of public approval that they *appear* to have. Some have argued that preference falsification explains this apparent support, with many people hiding their true views because they fear repression. Others, however, have argued that many autocrats are genuinely popular. For instance, researchers have explored the extent to which President Putin’s high approval ratings in Russia are “real” (e.g., Buckley et al. 2022; Frye et al. 2017), or whether trust in the top levels of the Chinese Communist Party is as robust as Chinese citizens report it to be (e.g., Huang et al. 2022; Robinson and Tannenber 2019). While preference falsification is an issue in some authoritarian contexts (Blair et al. 2020), its effects are often relatively small (Shen and Truex 2021), and in many cases, popular autocrats seem to be the real deal (Guriev and Treisman 2020). Particularly given the resurgence of authoritarian regimes, understanding why autocrats can be successful at acquiring popular support should be important (Carter and Carter 2023). Nonetheless, theories of authoritarian politics continue to lag in this regard (Przeworski 2023). By demonstrating that autocrats can protect their reputations and retain support even during periods of poor governance by using delegation to shift blame onto other political elites, the theory and evidence shed light on one important strategy on which autocrats can rely to influence public opinion in their favor.

In exploring how autocrats strategically structure decision-making in their regimes to manage the public’s attributions, the book also provides insights into the understudied policymaking processes of authoritarian regimes (Gandhi et al. 2020). I provide a theoretical

framework for understanding why autocrats may be more or less likely to exercise control over certain policy domains. For instance, they should be more willing to take the blame for foreign policy or security issues, where credibly empowering elites is particularly threatening, and they should be more willing to delegate decision-making powers for controversial social issues or the economy, from which elites acquire less power and where the public is particularly likely to be dissatisfied. In discussing my evidence from a number of different cases, I also provide detailed portrayals of how decision-making occurs. Much of my research focuses on the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and I show how ministers and even members of parliament exercise genuine influence over policy decisions and implementation, pushing the kingdom's policies toward their preferences. Though the king retains immense power and can usually find the means to force through his preferred policies, this approach is not costless, and so the palace often refrains from dictating policies in certain areas or at certain times. To understand how and why authoritarian regimes choose some policies over others, it is important to recognize the limitations of the autocrat's power and to pay attention to how responsibility is delegated within the political system.

The link between attributions of responsibility and decision-making also furthers our understanding of how and why autocrats share power with other political elites. First, power sharing can be conceptualized as giving elites access to rents or influence over policymaking, but much of the literature has focused on the former over the latter (e.g., Blaydes 2010; Lust-Okar 2006; Magaloni 2006; Reuter and Robertson 2015; Truex 2014). By showing when autocrats are more or less likely to delegate decision-making responsibility to their elite allies in the regime, the book builds on this literature to provide a clearer picture of how power sharing related to policymaking works.

Second, the existing literature on power sharing emphasizes that autocrats are motivated to cede influence to other elites as an incentive to maintain their loyalty. This research suggests that autocrats are more likely to share power when elites are stronger and can credibly threaten to overthrow them (Meng 2020; Svobik 2012), because in these cases the autocrat needs to placate them by providing a positive incentive in the form of rents or influence. At the same time, autocrats are unlikely to share power when elites are too powerful, because doing so strengthens their coercive power and may backfire by further

incentivizing a coup (Paine 2021, 2022; Roessler 2011). In other words, power sharing occurs when elites are neither too weak nor too strong. My book adopts this view of power sharing as an incentive for elite loyalty that may simultaneously strengthen elite threats, but I also explore how the decision to share power may be influenced by threats to the autocrat from the public. In doing so, my argument suggests conditions under which autocrats may be willing to cede some of their own influence even when elites are not particularly strong and are unlikely to threaten them credibly. As long as the autocrat is concerned that the public may become dissatisfied with policy outcomes, that they may be blamed for the public's grievances, and that this anger may facilitate protests challenging them directly, the autocrat has reasons to involve other political elites in the decision-making process.

This implication is related to seminal work by Gandhi (2008), who also argues that autocrats are more likely to govern alongside elites in institutions like legislatures and parties when they need cooperation from society at large. However, the mechanisms driving this dynamic differ. In Gandhi's theory, the public is co-opted by these institutions, because political elites will use their positions to bargain over and advocate for policies that their constituencies want. However, though these institutions can facilitate bargaining over policy (Noble 2020) and help autocrats to learn about the public's preferences (Truex 2016), the autocrat does not necessarily need to share significant power with elites in these bodies for them to fulfill these roles. Furthermore, even where institutions like legislatures do help the regime to understand the public better, the repressive nature of authoritarian politics will still make it difficult to know what exactly the public wants (Kuran 1991; Wintrobe 1998), and the regime may still struggle to govern effectively enough to avoid the kinds of unpopular outcomes capable of triggering mass protests. It is this concern about the ability to satisfy the public that should motivate autocrats to give elites actual power over decision-making, since they can reduce the risks of being held personally responsible if and when the public becomes dissatisfied. Thus, the book contributes to understanding of how power-sharing arrangements are not just a function of elite politics within authoritarian regimes, but also relate directly to popular politics. The autocrat's decisions about how to share power are influenced by potential threats from the masses, and the public's perceptions of blame and credit are then affected by these decisions about how power is shared.

The relationship between how decision-making processes are structured and how people attribute responsibility is relevant to the intensity of repression used by authoritarian regimes as well. Existing research indicates that “personalist” authoritarian regimes – that is, those in which power is more concentrated in the hands of the autocrat – are more likely to repress the public violently (Frantz et al. 2020). Blame dynamics may help to explain this pattern. Where the autocrat is so clearly dominant, grievances are more likely to target them directly and escalate into demands for their ouster. Because this discontent threatens them personally, the autocrat is likely to respond with force. By contrast, in authoritarian political systems where autocrats share power more widely, grievances are less likely to pose as much of a threat to the top of the regime, since blame is more likely to be focused on other political elites who also shape important policy decisions. In these cases, the autocrat has less reason to suppress the public’s anger violently, and even large protests may be tolerated (Schwedler 2022). In fact, the autocrat may actually benefit from learning about this dissatisfaction, since it provides information that allows them to give the people some of what they want by holding accountable the elites deemed responsible for their grievances (Lorentzen 2013; Schuler 2020).

This discussion suggests one channel through which limited accountability can operate in authoritarian regimes. Because free and fair elections are considered to be such a crucial element for holding political leaders accountable (Grossman and Slough 2022), it may seem an oxymoron to think of accountable autocracies. Nonetheless, there are mechanisms by which government officials can be held accountable in authoritarian regimes. Accountability can be implemented from the top down, with lower-level officials removed for poor performance by their superiors. In China, for instance, local leaders are often removed if they fail to meet governance targets (Guo 2007). For this approach to function, the autocrat and other powerful elites must have some commitment to good governance as well as accurate information about local performance – both of which are rare, particularly in authoritarian settings – or accountability will break down. Returning to China, local leaders will manipulate economic statistics to influence their chances of promotion, making it harder for the central government to identify effective governance (Wallace 2014). Other research has focused on bottom-up pressures for accountability in authoritarian

systems. Along these lines, Tsai (2007) shows how local communities can use social pressures and norms to hold officials accountable and ensure they deliver for the community. My argument about the relationship between power sharing and attributions suggests the possibility of a system of authoritarian accountability that combines both top-down and bottom-up elements. To the extent that power sharing occurs and elites who take part in decision-making are removed by the autocrat following expressions of popular dissatisfaction, these elites are being held accountable for their performance in office. This outcome resembles the well-known model of “fire-alarm” oversight defined by McCubbins and Schwartz (1984), whereby political leaders respond to problems identified by their constituents, which allows them to not only address the issue but also to receive credit for doing so. Of course, in such cases, only a limited version of accountability occurs, since the autocrat remains unaccountable themselves despite exercising more influence than anyone else over the political system (Fox and Jordan 2011).

Another implication of the book is to take seriously the idea that people think differently about different types of autocrats. Existing research has provided a number of insights into how authoritarian regimes structured around parties, militaries, monarchs, or strongmen differ from each other, with variation in the incentives they create for elites to remain loyal to the regime (Geddes 1999; Geddes et al. 2018); their ability to generate economic growth (Wright 2008); the likelihood they become involved in international conflict (Weeks 2012); and other important outcomes. This book expands on this literature by considering how popular politics may differ in these regimes because of variation in norms associated with the rulers who lead them. In my argument, popular sovereignty norms attached to most autocratic rulers create expectations that they should govern actively and be held accountable for the outcomes produced by their regimes, which may limit the effectiveness of institutional blame avoidance strategies that seek to shift blame by delegating responsibility to other political elites. Monarchs, however, are much less likely to face this problem, because they hold their positions on the basis of hereditary succession and are not expected to govern directly. As a result, they can avoid blame more effectively by delegating. It is possible to think of other ways in which norms attached to certain types of autocratic regimes and rulers may influence popular politics, and scholars would benefit from pursuing

this line of inquiry further. For example, there is a widespread norm of civilian authority that may shape how people react to military governments. There are also expectations for some types of leaders but not others to be elected, which may influence how people evaluate whether their countries are democratic or not.

1.4.2 Understanding Autocratic Monarchies

In one of his last publications before his passing, the renowned political scientist Juan Linz called on the discipline to “think about monarchy more” (Stepan et al. 2014). Monarchies may appear anachronistic in this age of popular sovereignty and elections, but they continue to govern several states of global importance. Furthermore, the trajectory of monarchies can provide important insights into the nature of authoritarian governance as well as historical and contemporary pathways of democratization. By identifying ways in which monarchies differ systematically from other authoritarian regimes, we can gain better insights into the factors that drive variation in outcome across autocracies as a whole. This book takes seriously the idea that the study of monarchy matters, and it advances understanding of this regime type in several ways.

First and foremost, the book contributes to a debate about the surprising pattern of royal durability in the post-World War II period, whereby ruling monarchies have been the most stable and longest-lived type of authoritarian regime (Geddes et al. 2014; Magaloni et al. 2013). Some scholars have suggested that the stability of monarchies has little to do with monarchy itself, but can be explained by omitted variables that correlate with these regimes. Greater oil wealth and more protective foreign patrons reflect some of the most cited factors (e.g., Gause 1994; Gause and Yom 2012; Gause 2013; Luciani 1987), but other relevant variables include the small size of most modern monarchies (Jugl 2020), their more liberal approach to governance (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002; Spinks et al. 2008), or more conservative and submissive political cultures (Sharabi 1988). While these factors may contribute to the stability of some monarchies, the durability advantage of monarchies remains when controlling for many of them in empirical studies (e.g., Menaldo 2012), which suggests there may be something about monarchy specifically that contributes to this pattern of royal resiliency.

An additional possibility is that the stability of monarchies can be explained by selection bias, such that we observe only the most durable monarchies surviving into the modern period but compare them to the full range of stable and unstable authoritarian regimes of other types. This explanation cannot be ruled out completely, but other academic work implies it is unlikely to explain the pattern fully. Anderson (1991) points out that most of the Middle East's monarchies – specifically, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, and many of the Gulf monarchies – are historical accidents that were not deeply rooted in the Arab world or Arab culture. Instead, they were established because of the notions of British imperialists.² Menaldo (2012) attempts to account for selection bias empirically by using an instrumental variable design in his study of instability in monarchies and nonmonarchies in the Arab world. Even with this design, he finds that the region's monarchies are still more stable than the nonmonarchies. Likewise, Gerring et al. (2021) show descriptively that monarchies were more durable than nonmonarchies between 1800 and 1920, suggesting that royal resiliency is not just a pattern of the modern period when monarchies are less common.

Other works have explored the sources of royal durability with compelling arguments that seem more likely to apply to a specific monarchy or set of monarchies. In his influential study of the Gulf monarchies, Herb (1999) argues that their reliance on exceptionally large families allows them to operate similarly to party regimes, by filling most government positions with royals and then working out agreements to share the benefits of ruling among the family. While this argument pertains well to these cases, and there is evidence that it applies historically as well (Kokkonen et al. 2021), it is less reflective of the majority of modern monarchies that survived for many decades, in which royal families were typically much smaller. Others have used specific cases to argue that monarchies possess ideological advantages over nonroyal autocracies, including more ideological flexibility (Anderson 2000), more durable legitimating symbols (Moore 1970), or stronger religious legitimacy (Daadaoui 2011; Lewis 2000; Menaldo 2012). While these arguments may also be plausible for some monarchies, it is

² Two exceptions are the monarchies of Morocco and Oman, whose dynasties have ruled for several centuries.

not clear that monarchies in general differ from other authoritarian regimes in terms of these characteristics (Bank et al. 2015). For instance, Egypt's authoritarian presidents have displayed significant ideological flexibility by adopting elements of nationalism, Islamism, and socialism (Brand 2014); Arab presidents in countries such as Algeria and Tunisia can legitimate themselves with powerful historical memories of anti-colonial revolutions; and nearly all Arab autocrats – in monarchies and republics alike – invest substantial effort in leveraging state religious establishments to demonstrate their commitment to the Islamic faith (Brown 2017). As such, my argument helps to push back against the claim that kings possess some special cultural or traditional legitimacy that creates a loyal and submissive populace.

My argument builds on another set of studies that focus on hereditary succession's ability to stabilize royal regimes. The advantage of this focus is that it draws on the institutional feature that most clearly sets monarchies apart from other regime types. In particular, scholars have argued that hereditary succession facilitates more effective coordination among political elites over the question of who should rule when the present autocrat dies or retires (Brownlee 2007; Brownlee et al. 2015; Menaldo 2012; Tullock 1987). As long as most powerful elites agree that a member of the royal family should take charge, even those who dislike the monarchy have few incentives to abandon it. This coordination reduces the likelihood that the regime breaks down because of conflict fueled by the uncertainty over succession, and it also grants monarchs a longer time-horizon that reduces their incentives to engage in potentially destabilizing actions like expropriations (Knutsen and Fjelde 2013). These arguments are focused primarily on elite politics within monarchies. My study extends this work by showing how hereditary succession helps to limit mass opposition to the monarch by facilitating more credible delegation and shaping expectations about the monarch's distance from decision-making. In advancing this argument, the book provides an institutional explanation for the surprising durability of these authoritarian regimes, and it supports this argument with case-specific as well as cross-national data analysis that reinforces the generalizability of my claims.

These findings contribute to understanding of why, in our democratic age, ruling monarchs who inherit the throne often appear to be genuinely popular for extended periods of time. That being said,

I do not challenge the idea that the widespread appeal of popular sovereignty means that monarchs are unlikely to reverse their slow march toward extinction, at least for the foreseeable future. Despite the machinations of scattered monarchists in countries such as Iran, it is almost inconceivable now that a new royal family can be created or a monarchy established in lieu of a republic. Today's royals benefit from institutionalized hereditary succession only because they could already claim royal status in decades past – theirs is not a title that can be claimed from scratch by an ambitious presidential autocrat.

Despite the possibility of this regime type's eventual disappearance, studying monarchy remains especially relevant for understanding the politics of the contemporary Middle East. Nearly all ruling monarchies that continue to survive today are located in the region. Given the global influence of several of these states, there is significant interest among policymakers and academics in understanding why they have been stable and whether they are likely to remain so. My book suggests that monarchies that delegate less credibly – such as the Saudi monarchy – will be more vulnerable to crises that generate widespread societal discontent. Though he remains Crown Prince at the time of writing, Mohammed Bin Salman's attempts to centralize power in his own hands may have implications for the stability of Saudi Arabia's authoritarian regime. On the one hand, he appears to have been effective so far at using his prominent position and association with popular social reforms to claim credit and build his reputation with the Saudi people. On the other hand, if his governance proceeds poorly, he may find himself relatively vulnerable to blame and more likely to be targeted by the masses. By contrast, the participatory politics of parliaments in Kuwait, Jordan, and Morocco, combined with relatively influential cabinets that take responsibility for day-to-day governance, should continue to help the monarchs in these countries weather periods of discontent. Meanwhile, the monarchies of Qatar and Oman have in recent years taken small steps to delegate more credibly to legislatures and cabinets.

In several European monarchies, delegation of decision-making responsibilities to parliaments and ministers eventually resulted in transitions to democracy. For this reason, there is much to learn about authoritarian stability and democratic change by studying the historical transitions of monarchies as a regime type (Stepan et al. 2014). Whether some of the Middle East's monarchies follow the very gradual

path of democratization experienced by some of their European counterparts remains an open question (Herb 2004). Where my study contributes to this literature is in showing that monarchies that centralized power more fully in the hands of the crown were less stable and more likely to be overthrown in the 1800s and early 1900s. In other words, kings who governed eventually could do wrong by their people, and they were more likely to lose their thrones as a result. By contrast, those monarchs who shared some genuine power with other political elites were more likely to survive into the modern period, even if they eventually became ceremonial leaders.

1.5 Plan of the Book

In the following chapter, I discuss in greater detail how people attribute blame and why blame matters for powerful autocrats. I then describe my theoretical framework for understanding strategic interactions around power sharing and blame in authoritarian political systems, considering the incentives of the dictator, regime elites, and the public. This framework expands on the discussion in this chapter about the contexts in which autocrats will be more or less likely to delegate decision-making responsibilities to other elites to avoid blame, highlighting variation across issues and over time. I next discuss why ruling monarchs are better positioned than other autocrats to use this strategy because of how hereditary succession creates more rigidity around who can be king while implying more flexibility for how kings are involved in governance. The chapter concludes by highlighting key implications that will be tested in the empirical sections.

The empirical chapters are organized to follow the structure of the theory. They first provide evidence for my general argument about the relationships between power sharing, blame attributions, and governance in authoritarian regimes, drawing on cross-national evidence as well as several chapters about politics in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. I then move to the argument about why monarchs specifically are *comparatively* better positioned to use delegation of decision-making responsibilities to protect their reputations and stabilize their regimes, again drawing on a mix of cross-national evidence and case studies.

Chapter 3 is the first to provide evidence consistent with the general theory. Here, I use cross-national data to assess the theory's key

assumptions and implications, illustrating the extent to which the connections between power sharing and the public's attributions are relevant to authoritarian politics globally. The chapter begins by using Google Trends data from dozens of countries to provide evidence that the public recognizes variation in the balance of power between autocrats and their elite allies. I then provide further evidence of this dynamic by analyzing trends data surrounding institutional changes affecting the credibility of delegation in Russia and Morocco. The fact that the public's attention shifts toward autocrats as they become less constrained in the decision-making process suggests that their exposure to attributions will be shaped by how they share power. Next, survey data from dozens of authoritarian regimes in Asia and Africa indicates that individuals who perceive the economy to be performing poorly are much more likely to report negative attitudes toward the autocrat *if* they believe that the autocrat does not share power with other elites, consistent with greater exposure to blame affecting popular support for the autocrat. Cross-national data on authoritarian regimes then illustrates how the politics surrounding attributions can affect strategic interactions related to autocratic governance more broadly. I document that autocrats who tie their hands and empower other elites more credibly are less likely to rely on repression, less likely to become the targets of mass opposition during periods of public discontent, and more likely to rotate elites out of government positions in a manner that is consistent with limited accountability for poor performance.

After discussing these cross-national patterns, the book turns to an in-depth case study of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The four Jordan chapters are particularly important for providing a fine-grained assessment of how delegation shapes public opinion in authoritarian regimes, how autocrats and elites react strategically to the public's attributions of blame, and how these blame games play out over time. Jordan itself provides a useful case for several reasons. First, Jordan represents a typical case of authoritarian rule in many ways (Seawright and Gerring 2008). The country is governed by a powerful autocrat – the monarch – who nonetheless shares power with many other political elites. This power sharing is facilitated by institutions such as the legislature and elections. Repression occurs but it is not especially heavy-handed; instead, as with many modern autocracies (Treisman and Guriev 2022), the regime prioritizes persuasion and

co-optation. As a result, lessons from Jordan may be applicable to authoritarian politics more generally. Second, Jordan has experienced substantial variation in the credibility of power sharing over time, and it is a monarchy. These features allow for a detailed exploration of the theory's mechanisms. Finally, Jordan also serves as an interesting case of authoritarian durability, as the monarchy has held onto power for more than a century despite a consistently weak economy, relatively frequent internal upheavals, and a difficult regional environment. In part for these reasons, the country has featured prominently in several important works on the survival strategies used by authoritarian regimes (e.g., Brand 1995; Gandhi 2008; Jamal 2013; Lust-Okar 2006, 2009; Yom 2015).

My study of Jordan was informed by one year of fieldwork in the country, and it relies on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. These data include just over 100 interviews with Jordanian political elites, including 3 former prime ministers, 3 former chiefs of the royal court, dozens of current and former ministers, senators, and members of parliament, and a number of bureaucrats, opposition activists, journalists, and political analysts. Interviews were semi-structured, with an emphasis on how responsibility for policy was delegated within the political system and how this delegation was perceived by the public, but they included specific questions tailored to the unique background of each individual as well. The data also include archival documents on Jordanian politics that I gathered at the National Archives of the United Kingdom; an original dataset of ministerial tenures between 1946 and 2017; text data scraped from the official websites of the Jordanian monarchy and parliament; and a variety of public opinion data including surveys, Google Trends, and a Facebook advertising experiment.

In Chapter 4, the first of the Jordan chapters, I discuss how the country's political system is structured to enable delegation of decision-making responsibilities to nonroyal elites and to propagate the idea of the monarchy's distance from policymaking. I first review the country's background and explain how power sharing functions in the political system. I then provide evidence that Jordan's kings have intentionally relied on delegation to the cabinet and parliament to minimize their exposure to popular anger, that they delegate more credibly for issues where blame is particularly relevant to their survival, and that they use school curricula to reinforce this strategy by propagating the

monarchical norm that the king is removed from – and therefore not responsible for – the policy process.

Chapter 5 leverages my public opinion data to offer micro-level evidence that Jordanians' attributions of responsibility are affected by the extent to which the king empowers other elites to govern. My interviews with opposition-oriented political elites suggest that even these individuals often believe sincerely that the king is not to blame for the country's issues. Survey responses indicate that this attitude is more widely held among the public, with many Jordanians believing that ministers and parliamentarians bear responsibility for poor outcomes in the country. An original experiment using Facebook ads provides one of the first attempts in Jordan to estimate support for the monarch relative to support for the prime minister and parliament: it suggests that the king is more popular, as expected, and that the king's popularity does not fluctuate in response to controversial policy decisions that do reduce support for the other two institutions. In other words, many Jordanians do not attribute blame to the king when they are upset, which helps to sustain popular approval of the monarchy and thus the stability of the regime.

Chapter 6 explores variation in delegation and blame across the country's modern history to offer further support for the theory's expectation that autocrats share power strategically to shape attributions as their threat environment changes. In particular, I explore how Jordan's monarchs have reacted strategically over time to different confluences of pressure from the public and political elites. During periods where the potential for popular dissatisfaction with governance outcomes has been high, the kings have reacted by strengthening the independence of the cabinet and parliament while distancing themselves from decision-making. When they have faced less public pressure, they have been more willing to assert themselves over the policy process. Alongside these trends, I provide evidence that the public's attributions of blame have shifted in response to these changes, with the Hashemite monarchs more likely to become the target of popular anger when they have controlled decision-making more directly. This pattern reinforces the idea that kings do not inherently benefit from some special bond with the people but are also likely to attract blame when the structure of decision-making demonstrates clearly their responsibility for governance outcomes.

As the last of the Jordan chapters, Chapter 7 considers how broader governance issues in Jordan are shaped by the blame avoidance strategy of the Hashemite kings. I document how protest activity is common and rarely repressed, reflecting the fact that most protests do not target the monarchy and if anything allow the king to respond to popular discontent. In addition to permitting protests, I discuss how the monarchy has rarely repressed political elites as well. Instead, the kings' approach has been to give elites policy influence alongside access to rents, which incentivizes elites to be involved in governance and protect the king from blame. This approach also explains why opposition elites often play along with the monarchy's blame game even when they themselves believe the king is at fault for the country's problems. By agreeing to publicly blame political actors other than the king, the opposition can also gain access to the decision-making process and the benefits this access entails. As long as most of the public does not agree with the opposition that the king should be held responsible for what goes wrong, this bargain makes strategic sense. Yet, the opposition's public endorsement of the king's lack of responsibility may help to reinforce the public's belief in the king's innocence, undermining the likelihood that a disgruntled public coordinates against the monarchy. Finally, I use data on ministerial tenures to show that the kings provide some measure of accountability in the political system by removing prime ministers and cabinets as the public becomes less satisfied with governance outcomes.

Chapter 8 returns to a comparative approach to assess the second primary argument of the book: that ruling monarchs are better positioned than other autocrats to use delegation as a blame avoidance strategy. It does so by combining global cross-national evidence with comparisons of monarchies and republics in the Arab world specifically. First, I compare how authoritarian monarchs differ from other autocrats when it comes to involving elites in their countries' decision-making processes, showing evidence that delegation is safer for monarchs and that they tend to delegate more credibly. I then use observational and experimental survey data from the Arab world to show that this difference is perceived by citizens of these regimes, and that monarchs also benefit from lower expectations to involve themselves in governance. Global comparative data on constitutions reinforce this latter point, illustrating how monarchs are not typically

expected to participate in governance or face accountability for their decisions, particularly when compared to other types of authoritarian rulers. Finally, I consider the implications of these arguments for the extended durability of monarchies. Analysis of cross-national instability data shows that monarchs are less likely than other autocrats to confront mass opposition during periods when the public is aggrieved, suggesting that their blame avoidance advantage benefits the persistence of the regime. I connect these patterns to the monarchies' greater resiliency during the Arab Spring, tracing how presidential autocrats in Egypt and Tunisia failed to shift blame effectively in the decade prior to the Arab Spring when compared to their royal counterparts in Jordan and Morocco.

In Chapter 9, I assess how the book's argument contributes to understanding of political change *within* monarchies. Despite the fact that most governments in the modern world transitioned from monarchy at some point in the past two centuries, there are few studies that attempt to understand why some monarchies survived and others did not (Stepan et al. 2014). First, I use historical cross-national data on monarchies extending back to the 1800s to demonstrate that more centralized monarchies were more likely to experience regime change in a democratizing world, consistent with these monarchs being more exposed to the public's anger. I then discuss case studies of Iran and Nepal to illustrate how monarchs who centralize decision-making powers in their own hands make themselves vulnerable to blame and opposition just as any other autocrat does.

Chapter 10 concludes the book with a discussion of further implications for the politics of authoritarian rule. In particular, I consider how different types of authoritarian regimes may reflect the structures of royal institutions in ways that allow autocrats to protect their reputations, and how the theory may provide insights into trajectories of democratization.