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The Political Economy of Autocratic Constitutions

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Abstract:

Why do autocrats adopt constitutions? Constitutions can help dictators consolidate power, increase investment, and boost economic development — all while generating a steady flow of rents for themselves and their cronies without empowering challengers so as to undermine their authority. Autocratic constitutions play a crucial role in consolidating the inner ranks of the autocratic regime by fostering loyalty and trust between the dictator and his launching organization (LO) early in the regime, when uncertainty about the dictator's intentions is considerable and the LO's de facto power is at its height. One key function of autocratic constitutions is to consolidate a new distribution of power. To accomplish this, autocratic constitutions may outline limits on executive authority, codify individual rights and political obligations and, given the right conditions, impose constraints on executive authority. We test this theoretical framework on a panel dataset of Latin American dictators between 1950 and 2002. We find that the creation of a constitution under dictatorship can enable an autocratic coalition to co-opt threats to their rule and last longer in office, a finding that holds even after controlling for country fixed effects, other possible indirect institutional pathways and after instrumenting autocratic constitutions with constituent assembly elections held prior to constitutional promulgation. Employing the same robustness checks, we also find

that autocratic constitutions are associated with stronger property rights protection, higher rates of private investment, and economic growth.

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