The Role of Direct Democracy under Autocratic Rule

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Abstract

While common in some autocratic nations, the use of plebiscites is rare in other dictatorships. In this paper we seek the causes behind this phenomenon. We hypothesize that the political structure of the regime, the duration and the socioeconomical circumstances of the country will play a role in whether a regime is prone or not to use plebiscites. To test these hypotheses we use a database of autocracies, covering the second half of the 20th century.

Introduction

'*When the transcendence of certain laws advises it or the public interest demands it, the Head of State may, for the best service of the Nation, submit to referendum the draft laws prepared by the Courts*.' First Article (National Referendum Law) 1945 (Spa).

After the Spanish Civil War General Franco passed the Fundamental Laws. The objective of these laws was to set the foundations of his new regime. One of those laws was the National Referendum Law. This law established that issues of relevance should be legislated after a national plebiscite. Franco's dictatorship was long-lasting, and ended with Franco's death in 1975. During his rule, Franco substituted political institutions from the Second Republic with new political institutions— like the 'Cortes Españolas' or the said plebiscites. These institutions had the façade of a democratic country, which in no way was. The main objective of these new institutions was to find some sort of legitimation and collaboration for his authoritarian rule. The Law that created that said Cortes explicitly states: 'The Cortes are the highest body for the participation of the Spanish people in the government tasks' First Article (Creation of the Cortes Españolas) 1942 (Spa). These phenomena is common in the dictatorships from the 1930's, often from a fascist tradition.

Authoritarian regimes are those who do not apply the democratic methods of formation and selection of leaders and figures in their political configuration. This is a broad definition of authoritarian regimes but it has advantages. It is a complex issue to define what is and what not a democratic method, and therefore, a non-democratic method. This is due to the many factors affecting the context in which a democratic political

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configuration works properly. Many authors have sought for the correct formula. We can mention, for instance, Robert Dahl. In his definition he lists a number of prerequisites that a country must achieve in order to be poliarchic—which is a proxy category to democracy—like freedom of press or freedom of association.

If we apply negative reasoning, we will define autocracy as anything which cannot be classified as democracy, which follows Geddes' definition (2014). Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014) classify autocratic regimes as those regimes in which power is achieved with undemocratic means. These means are any other means but a free and fair, competitive election. A country is also autocratic if power is achieved in a legitimate election but afterwards government changes the rules in subsequent elections in order to limit competition[3].

Once we have a definition for autocracies, we can introduce direct democracy mechanisms. Direct democracy mechanisms are those mechanisms in which the citizens emit their opinion on issues directly in the ballot box through universal and secret suffrage (Altman, 2011). Of course, this definition attends to a democratic context. In our case, we can relax the restriction that it supposes universal and secret suffrage. Autocracies usually have ways to know the identities of voters who oppose the position of the autocrat towards the plebiscite. An illustrative example is the Italian Referendum in May 1929. Mussolini raised the question to the people: 'Do you approve of the list of deputies nominated by the Fascist Grand Council?' Only people who paid a tax or were members of fascist unions were eligible to vote, and the vote 'Yes' was coloured with the Italian flag colours, while the ballot 'No' was a brown paper. An extreme case of this manipulation happened in fascist Romania, in a referendum over Antonescu's policies, where voters had to orally manifest their vote.

At this point, we can narrow the difference in significance between a referendum and a plebiscite. Following Altman's (2011) classification of mechanisms of direct democracy, the difference between one another lies in who summons the mechanism: the society or the government. Mechanisms of direct democracy called by society by gathering of signatures or similar proceedings are called referendums, while those called by governments are plebiscites. In an autocratic context like the one of this paper, every mechanism of direct democracy is a plebiscite.

The objective of this paper is not to find if the use of these mechanisms is legitimate, fair and reasonable. We know that most of the plebiscites called in autocracies can and will be unfair. Some notable examples of this manipulation can be found in Altman's essay 'Direct Democracy Worldwide' (2011), under the name of 'Nightmare Team of Direct Democracy', which include countries like Iraq, Syria or Romania. The outcome of the vote in the plebiscites called in these countries is near 100 %, an unlikely result to find under a fully democratic regime. Our objective is to find why countries that can manipulate the outcome to the extreme of 100 % actually find the necessity of passing a plebiscite in the first place.

The question about the role of plebiscites in authoritarian rules could be translated, perhaps as: Why do autocracies mimic democracies? We should expect that plebiscites

[3] Further and detailed information of the definitions can be found in Autocratic Regimes Code Book (Geddes, Wright and Frantz).

are convoked for the same reasons than phony elections are convoked (Prezeworski, Ghandi, others). But, do they really? Could we consider, to the contrary, that top-down consultations are a strategic divide of rulers of modern polities, regardless of regime? In that case, perhaps, we could discern some common patterns for dictators and democratic rulers. This research aims to take steps in the direction of clarifying those questions. It intends to contribute some empirical evidence to theoretical debates about plebiscitarian democracy, authoritarianism and representation.

We can summarize the two recent empiric approaches to these issues in the works of Altman (2011) and Qvortrup et al (2018). Altman focuses on the broad picture of direct democracy, not in the particularities of autocracies. Nevertheless, he makes some references on not fully democratic countries, which he classifies in a gradual manner using Polity IV measurements. He finds that the more plebiscites a country celebrates, the more democratic that country is. He also has some references to political arrangement of the non-democratic country, in which he finds that military and civil autocracies celebrate more plebiscites than parliamentary democracies. Qvortrup's focuses in the use of a particular kind of plebiscites—repressive ones—in autocracies. One of the main findings of their work is that autocracies with high ethnic division are more likely to use this kind of plebiscites. We take elements from both works in this paper, which we expand with some of our particular hypotheses and apply them in the data framework of autocracies.

In this paper we will firstly present the reasoning behind our hypotheses. Then, we will discuss the effects of political structure and time effect in the odds of having a plebiscite in an autocracy as well as structural hypotheses to socioeconomical matters in the autocracy. Afterwards we will discuss some of the said issues in a descriptive manner. Then, we will recapitulate our hypotheses and test them in a regression model. Finally, we will discuss the results.

Autocracies: differences among types

Autocracies are not homogenous in their political arrangements. Some autocracies find their political leaders in generals and military staff and other autocracies find them in the head of a strong political party. Some others find their lead in strong person, who holds the political power over a weak party fully controlled by that personal figure. Finally, others find that a royal family has all the power.

These are some of the most known features of autocracies, but if we go further in detail we can find even more differences between autocracies. Lewitsky and Way (2002) distinguish between some autocracies which allow some degree of political freedom: competitive and hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes. Diamond (2002) also states in a similar fashion the definition of hybrid regimes. These regimes allow some opposition political parties to exist, and formally, some democratic institutions do exist. But real competition is not allowed, as autocrats often rig the election, ban parties with a chance to win or use violence and coaction against the opposition. De facto is still a autocracy, even if elections happen.

Still, we will refer to the simpler, broad categories we mentioned in the first paragraph, which corresponds to Geddes et al (2014) classification of types of regimes. The first

category is personalistic autocracies. These autocracies are itself a field of study and in many cases must be approached in a *sui generis* way because of their uniqueness. This means that most autocracies have their own distinct traits, and adding them up in a single category may be problematic in terms of information loss. We may find personalistic autocracies that origin from a coup, similarly to militaristic, and progressively evolved towards a single-ruler system instead of a military junta. This may be the case of Spanish Francoist dictatorship. Other personalistic autocracies may come from proper democratic contexts in which the system was corrupted towards autocracy. This is a trait explained in Levitsky and Ziblatt's essay: How Democracies Die (2018). In this case, the autocrat usually uses his popularity and the control of the legislative or executive powers to his own means. The military backs the autocrat or at very least passively accepts these measures in critical moments. This may be the case of Fujimori's auto coup and subsequent autocrat period from 1992 to 2000. We may find more differences between these kinds of autocracies, but if we have to find something in common between them is the lack of a strong autonomous political party. All this autocrats have a political party in their system, to which he belongs, but the party is always under his control and never the other way around. This also was the criterion used to classify them in the database used (Geddes et al, 2014). This party is sometimes created *ad hoc* by the autocrat, others is the evolution of a weak existing party.

Military autocracies often transform in other kind of autocracy. They usually reach power motivated by several reasons, as the repulse to a previous government or to benefit the army as a corporative whole in a new regime or with a provisional government. This argument follows Geddes (2018), which argues that coups are usually motivated by the pursuit of better conditions for the armed forces officials. This causes difficulties analysing this kind of regime. On the other side, monarchies are simpler—at first sight—to analyse. These are usually long-lasting regimes set by a simpler legislative structure based on tradition or tribalism.

The last category is party autocracies. The most common party autocracy is communist autocracies, mainly those under the influence of the Soviet Union or Communist China. Even though those are the most acknowledged cases, some other cases of party autocracy exist, for example, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) ruled Mexico for most part of the 20th century. Party autocracies find a stronger corporative body in which the actual power resides. The party itself can change its leader, so the head is neither permanent nor inviolable, but the party as a hegemonic political force in the country is untouchable. A good example of this is the Communist Party of China (CPC). China has changed its president in several occasions since the birth of Communist China, but the CPC remains hegemonic.

There is a reason for using this four-fold division. The goal of this paper is to seek the traits that cause a regime to call for a plebiscite. A possible reason to call for a plebiscite is the pursuit for legitimacy in a regime. Lipset defined legitimacy as "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society" (1959). Following this reasoning, different regimes will maintain this belief in different ways, and plebiscites may be a tool in the pursuit of legitimation. For example, while personalistic autocracies may use them—in a Napoleonic fashion— to project their legitimacy, party autocracies may not use them because their legitimacy is articulated through the ruling party. This will be the

reasoning behind our hypotheses. In following sections descriptive data will be provided in this sense.

Plebiscites and autocracies

Plebiscites can be seen as tools for policy both in democracies and in autocracies. But the utility of a plebiscite goes further from the mere approval of a piece of legislation. It can also be seen as a barometer for the popularity of the ruler—this still holds for democracies—or as a way to divide society on a polemic matter, among other utilities.

In our field of study, we expect that political structures influence the expectative for holding a plebiscite. Political structures are complex to measure and evaluate, as we saw with the typology of autocracies. This political structure hypothesis also has space for more questions than political arrangement. The way that a country has solved political matters in the past affects how it solves them in the present, and having used plebiscites—or direct democracy in general—in the past may influence the odds of using that mechanism in the present. Furthermore, if that mechanism solved the matter in a successful way, it may be recalled as a positive tool, and therefore likely used in the present for present political issues. For that matter, we hypothesize that the countries that used plebiscites in the past may use them in the present too. This also goes along with the analogy that Lipset (1959) quoting Weber stated of a dice that each time is cast and a certain face is winner, that face is loaded for the next round, increasing the chances of that face being the winner in following casts. As Lipset then argues, this is assuming that political systems gather momentum.

In the introduction we stated some that plebiscites—some from a fascist tradition, others in a Napoleonic fashion—take place in the beginning of a new regime. These are the *concessio imperii* plebiscites. These act as a way of giving full powers to the new leader. Others may not literally give full power to the new leader but act as a measure of the popularity of the new regime, both for legitimacy and for intimidation of opposition. We hypothesize that in the initial years of a regime the likeliness of holding a plebiscite are higher than after the settlement of the autocracy. Connected with this argument, we also hypothesize that the duration of the regime will have an effect on the chances of having a plebiscite. The longer the regime is, the lower the chances of holding a plebiscite. Once a regime has settled in power and established its mechanisms of share of power and repression of opposition, the use of plebiscites should be lower than after all that process and is likely that the autocrat will only use a plebiscite when strictly needed.

Qvortrup et al (2018) stated that ethnic fractionalization raises the chances of holding a 'RiR' (repressive integrationist referendum). This RiRs are referendums where the endorsement of the government option is 99% or higher. They argue that in countries with high ethnic fractionalization, kinship rivals with support to the regime, and in turn the regime will use this RiRs as a show of force. This is an argument that we also adopt but to which we must oppose the argument that in regimes where ethnic fractionalization is higher, the chances of a failed show of force are also higher. But since the baseline of their work is not the same as ours, we must take Qvortrup's results not strictly applicable to our field.

Gandhi and Przeworski (2006, 2007) stated the importance of natural resources —and institutions— as a tool for cooperation and cooptation. They demonstrated both empirically and theoretically that cooperation may be achieved with different instruments, and pseudo-democratic institutions may be used when in lack of natural resources. These resources generate rents that the regime may use discretionally to coopt important people towards the regime. Wright, Frantz and Geddes (2013) also demonstrated that oil reduces the risk of autocratic regime collapse by deterring coups and consequently promotes authoritarian survival. We hypothesize that if a regime has abundant natural resources, they may not need to use plebiscites, which will reduce the chances of using this instrument.

Political violence and turmoil is a multifaceted problem when thinking of plebiscites. Autocrats may use them to reduce turmoil once is generated, but he may lose the election and rigging the vote—when obvious to opposition—may in turn cause more violence than he had in the first place. The autocrat may find easier to give in to the reclamations of demonstrators when violence rises in the country than to placate them using a plebiscite. Though, this is a complex issue. We cannot clearly hypothesize the direction of the effect of political turmoil in the chances of holding a plebiscite. On the other side, international violence like wars or frontier conflicts may reduce the chances of holding a plebiscite. When these events happen, the popularity of the dictator is boosted, and the executive is occupied with the conflict, so it may in turn reduce the chances of holding a plebiscite.

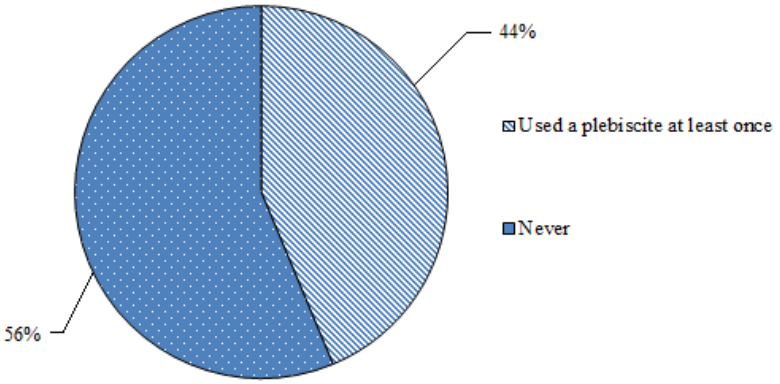
Finally, is expected that socioeconomic conditions that foster democratic institutions, foster the chances of holding a plebiscite. In his 1959 article Lipset stated some indicators of socioeconomic welfare that were connected with democracies, from which we chose GDP and urbanization. We hypothesize that higher GDPs and urbanization will raise the chances of holding a plebiscite.

The usage of direct democracy mechanisms under autocratic government

In this section we will answer some simple, preliminary empirical questions that affect our hypotheses. Since these questions are of mostly descriptive, most of them will be addressed with graphic figures for its simpler understanding.

The first step is to ask if autocrats do actually use plebiscites. Its importance of this question lies in the availability of a plebiscite as a tool for politics in autocracies. If plebiscites have not —or very rarely— been used, that would mean that it is not a proper tool. In Graphic 1, we can observe that 40% of autocracies have used at least once a plebiscite.

Graphic 1 Autocracies that used a plebiscite at least once

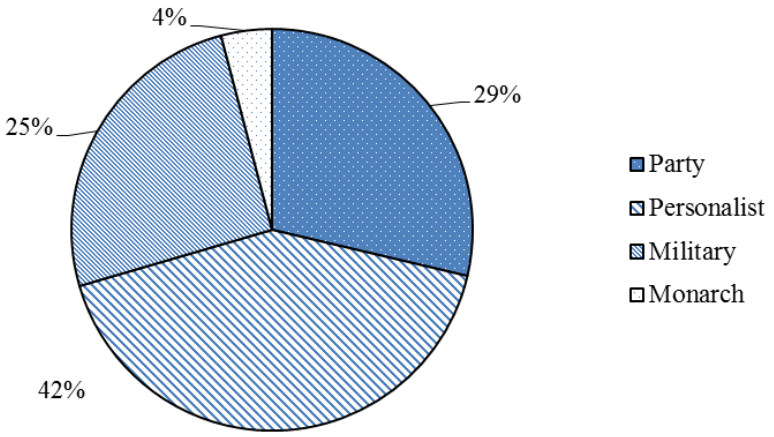


Source: own elaboration combining V-Dem (2018) and Autocratic Regimes Database (2014).

Since 56% of the autocracies of the sample have never used a plebiscite, that changes the focus of attention to why a plebiscite is held, not how many plebiscites are held. This must be taken into consideration when specifying the econometric models.

Secondly, we can question whether different types of regime are prone to use plebiscites under their rule. To answer this question we will use a descriptive analysis of the proposed data. In Graphic 2 we depict which of the four different kinds of autocracy previously described were those who used plebiscites.

Graphic 2 Plebiscite usage under Autocratic Regimes by type of regime, 1946 - 2010



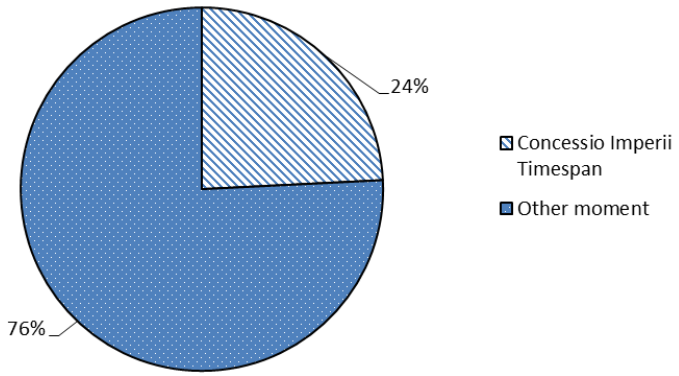
Source: own elaboration combining V-Dem (2018) and Autocratic Regimes Database (2014).

Almost half of the total plebiscites used from 1946 to 2010 took place personalistic dictatorships. Party autocracies are the second institutional arrangement by use of direct democracy closely followed by military autocracies. Monarchies only sum up 4% of the regimes using plebiscites. When addressing military and monarchical autocracies we may object that these autocracies achieve power and legitimation through their own means. Monarchies are often legitimated by God or tradition, while military autocracies are usually the result of a coup to a previous government. This follows what we previously

stated in sections before. Military legitimation is often scarce, and those regimes are usually short-lived.

Initial moments of an autocratic regime are critical in terms of legitimation. As we previously stated, autocrats may use plebiscites in the beginning of its regime as a tool to remedy that weakness. In Graphic 3 we can see the percentage of plebiscites used during the four initial years of a given regime.

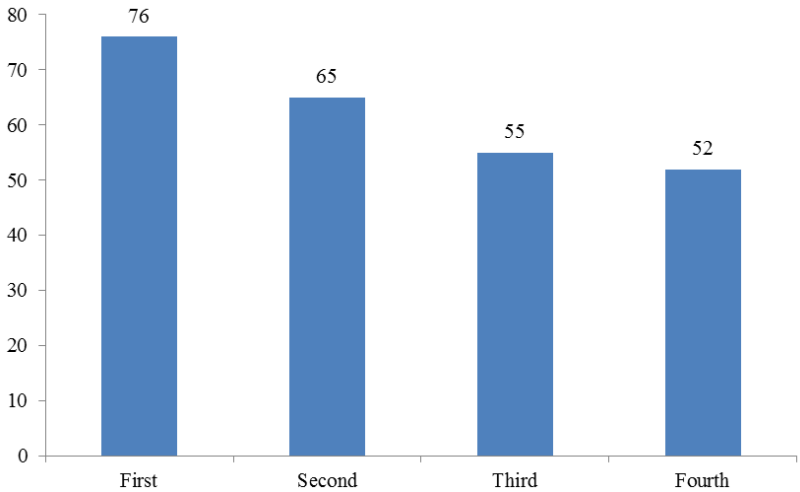
Graphic 3 Concessio Imperii plebiscites



Source: own elaboration using V-Dem (2018).

Almost a quarter of the plebiscites of our sample took place in the four initial years of a regime, giving the intuition that this factor works as we expected. We also stated that ethnic fractionalization would affect the odds of holding a plebiscite, similar to what Qvortrup et al (2018) stated. We did not have a clear sign for the direction of the effect, but in Graphic 4 we can see that the direction of the effect is negative.

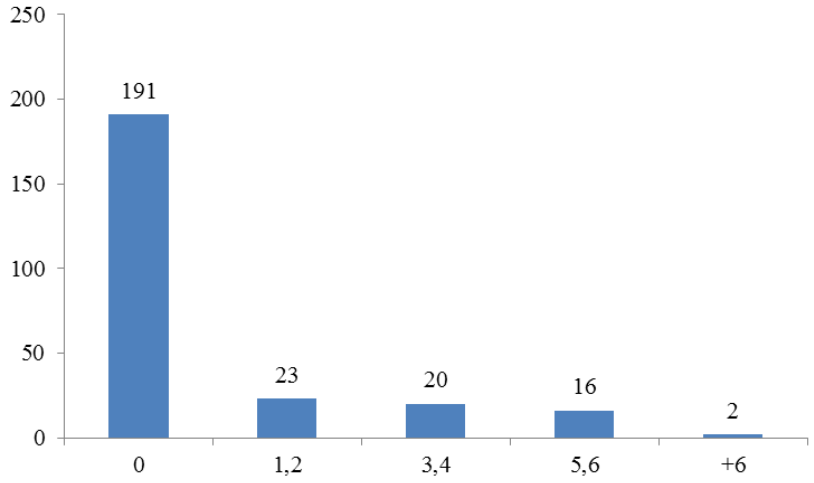
Graphic 4 Ethnic Fractionalization (quartiles) and Plebiscites



Source: own elaboration combining V-Dem (2018) and Alesina et al (2003).

Turmoil was an issue we also stated as influential when using a plebiscite. Though is sometimes stated that plebiscites may be used to suffocate political instability in the regime, the fear to lose a plebiscite leaves us with confronted arguments relating this issue. In Graphic 5 we can see that most of the plebiscites took place when no civil turmoil—measured on a scale from zero to ten—was taking place than in any other moment.

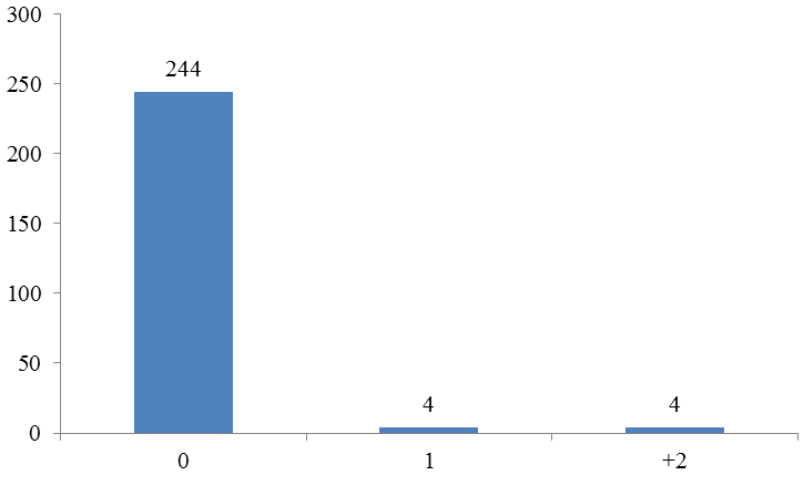
Graphic 5 Internal turmoil and plebiscites



Source: own elaboration combining V-Dem (2018) and Marshall (2017).

In relation to external violence between countries, in Graphic 6 we can see the clear negative tendency between wars and plebiscites. This goes along our hypotheses that regimes will not invest money and effort in plebiscites in war periods.

Graphic 6 External violence and plebiscites



Source: own elaboration combining V-Dem (2018) and Marshall (2017).

With this preliminary descriptive issues addressed we will proceed to the econometrical part of the paper, in which we will use a regression analysis to study the data. In the following section we will state our hypotheses previous to the final part.

Hypotheses

Following the reasoning in the three previous sections, we will recapitulate and number our hypotheses in the following:

1. The kind of autocracy will affect the chances of having a plebiscite. The way in which it will be affected will be determined by the kind of autocracy. Personalist autocracies will raise the probability of plebiscite, while party autocracies and monarchies will lower the chances.
2. Time will affect the chances of plebiscite, lowering them as long as the regime is progressively being established. Also, the critical moment will be the initial years of the regime (*concessio imperii*) in which the odds will rise.
3. Having previous experiences in the use of referendums and plebiscites will raise the chances a plebiscite will be held.
4. Fractionalization will raise the chances of having a plebiscite, following Qvortrup et al (2018).
5. Socioeconomical factors that spur democratization will raise the chances of a plebiscite taking place in a given autocracy: higher GDP and urbanization will be positively correlated with plebiscites.
6. Having natural resources will deter the dictator in the use of plebiscites, as he will use other policy tools.
7. International violence will lower the chances of holding a plebiscite. Internal violence is will lower the chances too.

Now we will proceed with the data used in our empirical models to test these hypotheses.

Data and model specification

We gathered data from different databases. Our primary source is the Autocratic Regime Database elaborated by Geddes et al (2014). The fourfold classification of the regimes (monarchies, party, personalistic and military) and the regime duration belong to this database. To that baseline autocratic country database we added data from other sources. The plebiscite information count we used is a combination from Altman's section in Varieties of Democracy Database (2018) and the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy (C2D).

The ethnic fractionalization information of the regimes is extracted from Alesina (2003) and consists in one observation for each country. The GDP observations are extracted from Maddison Database Project (2018), and consist of real GDP per capita observations in 2011US$. The urbanization index is the percentage of population of the involved country that lives in urban areas (as defined by their national statistical offices). Its source is the World Bank Data Base. The natural resources data used belong to the Haber and

Menaldo Natural Resources Dataset (2011). We used the Real Value of Petroleum, Coal, Natural Gas, and Metals Produced Per Capita. For the political violence variables we used Major Episodes of Political Violence and Conflict Regions Database (2011), from which we used the variables for civil violence (internal violence) and inter country violence.

We created a dummy variable for *Concessio Imperii* plebiscites, which has a value of one for the four first years of the regime, time where we would expect this kind of plebiscites to happen. The variable for plebiscites in 20th century holds a vector of ones from the year after first plebiscite. The variable for the second is constructed in the same way, but after the second plebiscite.

The six models are negative binomial panel models. Various alternatives were taken into account—like Poisson negative or zero-inflated models—but none of them fitted accordingly to the data, as proof showed[4]. The panel modelization was significantly strong not to use pooled models, so panel structure was used. Using time-invariant variables led us to using random-effect models, as using fixed effect models eliminated a third of our observations, among other reasons. Additionally, we added one lag of the endogenous variable to deal because of the temporal structure of the database. We did this in three separated models (2, 4 and 6 in Table 1) because adding this variable eliminated important observations. As natural resources and GDP are variables strongly related, this caused multicollinearity. To address this problem, we estimated two separated models using one of these variables each (3 and 4 for GDP, and 5 and 6 for natural resources).

In models 1 and 2 we estimated the effects of structural variables, like political arrangement and history in the use of plebiscites, as well as regime duration. These two models are conceptualised as political models, while the rest are socioeconomic models. The mixing of excessive dummy variables and the risk of overfitting the model motivated us to separate the variables in this way. Nevertheless, intermediate models were still viable.

Results

In Table 1 we find the results of the six models estimated. We report the incidence-rate ratios, as they are easier to interpret than the raw coefficients. Ratios higher than one mean positive effect and vice versa. Afterwards, we show the 95% confidence intervals of the raw estimators of models 1, 2 3 and 5 in Graphic 7.

[4] Likelihood ratio test was used to compare between negative binomial and Poisson, which indicated that binomial negative fitted better. Akaike Information Criterion was used for comparison with zero-inflated models, which showed that binomial negative was slightly better. In order to fit the country heterogeneity and for simplicity reasons, binomial negative was used.

Table 1 Regression on political variables

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model5	Model 6
Duration	0.9867**	0.9881**	0.9795***	0.9821***	0.9816***	0.9836***
	(0.0057)	(0.0057)	(0.0061)	(0.0062)	(.0061)	(0.0062)
Party	0.6374*	0.5102***				
	(0.149)	(0.1304)				
Personalistic	0.9657	0.8533				
	(0.2184)	(0.2121)				
Monarchy	0.8895	0.7811				
	(0.3378)	(0.3159)				
Concessio Imperii	1.2291	0.9627				
	(0.2100)	(0.1878)				
Plebiscite in 20thC	2.1141***	2.102***				
	(0.5591)	(0.6003)				
2nd Plebiscite	1.4442**	1.3712				
	(0.2851)	(0.2914)				
Ethnic Fractionalization			0.4974	0.4675	0.5412	0.5495
			(0.2316)	(0.2305)	(0.2558)	(0.2701)
GDPpc			0.9999*	0.9999*		
			(0.0000)	(0.0000)		
Urbanization Index			1.0135**	1.0133*	1.0101	1.0097
			(0.0067)	(0.0071)	(0.0062)	(0.0065)
Natural Resources					0.9998*	0.9998
					(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Internal Violence			0.9871	0.9908	0.9864	0.9902
			(0.0461)	(0.1129)	(0.0465)	(0.0481)
Interstate Violence			0.7555*	0.7713*	.7708*	0.7692*
			(0.1125)	(0.0478)	(0.1097)	(0.1122)
1 Lag		0.7687		0.7737		0.8089
		(0.1632)		(0.1664)		(0.1742)
Constant	65555.71	103222.1	643005.2	450970.7	43247.27	173813
	(2.85e+07)	(6.22e+07)	(3.87e+08)	(2.25e+08)	(2.42e+07)	(1.37e+08)
Wald $\chi 2$	45.48***	37.97***	22.60***	20.13***	18.13***	15.99**
Observations	4,591	4,415	3,675	3,572	3,492	3,389
Countries	120	119	109	109	111	110

Standard errores in parentheses. Random Effects modelization.
* p<0.1, **p<0.05, *** p<0.01

We will firstly refer to Models 1 and 2. We can see the negative effect of the duration of the regime. Though slight, we must take into consideration that this is an accumulative effect. The negative effect may keep multiplying through the years until becomes relevant. We can infer that in long lasting regimes the chances of having a plebiscite in the latter moments are highly affected by the length of time of that regime.

The political arrangement variables give different results. Being a party regime reduces the chances of having a plebiscite, which goes along with our expectations but the rest of the variables give inconclusive results. *Concessio Imperii* variable has the same problem. This opens field for further research into this variables and their effects.

Addressing the use of plebiscites in the past, having used a plebiscite in the past raises the chances of holding a plebiscite in the present, which is consistent with our hypotheses. This may mean that regimes may keep the traditions that the country had in the past for getting legitimated. A second plebiscite is also significant, but their effect is lower. A third variable was included in previous versions of the model, which was eliminated for both not being significant and over fitting the model. That may mean that most of the regimes hold approximately three plebiscites, but this is only valid for the timespan selected so its interpretation further of the first plebiscite may be devious.

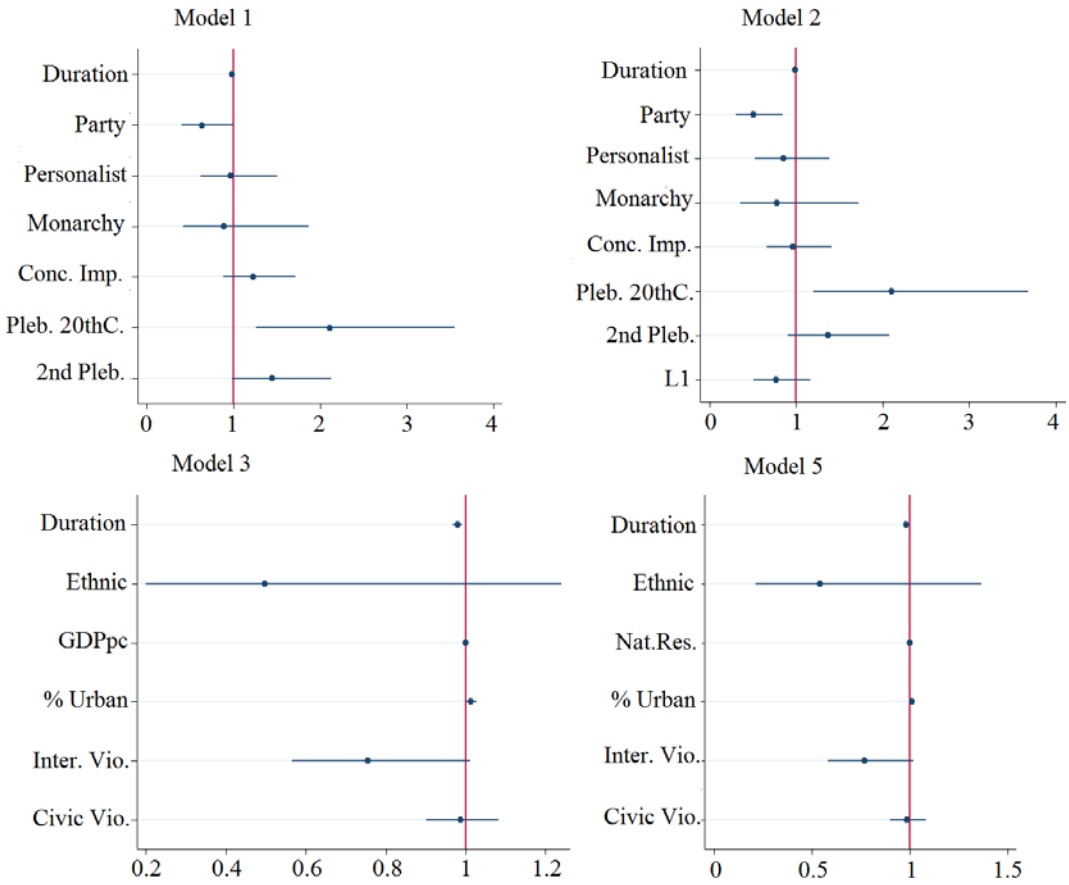
The next two columns have the third and fourth models, which have the GDP variables included. In these two models we can see that the estimator for ethnic fractionalization is not significant. GDP has a slight negative effect, which should be interpreted in the same way that the duration variable: accumulative effects in the rise of GDP lower the chances of holding a plebiscite—and vice versa, because this is a variable that, contrary to duration, can rise and fall as time passes. The urbanization index has a positive effect in the chances of holding a plebiscite, which is also consistent with our hypotheses. These two variables have opposite directions, and while urbanization follows our hypotheses, GDP does not. This may in turn mean that not every factor that fosters democratization causes the same effect over the use of plebiscites. This two phenomena—democratization and the use of plebiscites—may follow different paths of incentives and disincentives, though some of them may be coincidental.

Internal violence indicator is not significant, leaving our hypotheses unconcluded, but external, international violence is significant and lowers the chances of a plebiscite happening. This may go along with the explanation given: a regime involved in a war or a military conflict may not find timely launching a plebiscite, both for the investment of time and resources and the popularity boost is probably unneeded.

The last two columns hold the estimation of the same model, but with the natural resources variable. While urbanization losses significance, natural resources slightly hold it with a small negative effect. This may represent weak proof for the tested hypotheses. In model 6, natural resources are not significant.

To aid the interpretation given to the estimators of the models, we present Graphic 7, with the 95% confidence intervals of the estimators of models 1, 2, 3 and 5.

Graphic 7 Confidence Intervals



In Graphic 7 we can see that some of those non-significant estimators are mostly negative, like ethnic fractionalization, or *concessio imperii* plebiscites in model 1. The openness of the interval of ethnic fractionalization hints that extreme cases take place in both holding and not holding a plebiscite, so its significance is compromised.

Conclusions

Results show that political structure affects the likeliness of the celebration of a plebiscite in a regime, but not in every sense we hypothesized. Duration follows our hypotheses, reducing the chances of having a plebiscite. Being a party dictatorship lowers the chances of holding plebiscites too. This follows the argument that party dictatorships have other channels to obtain legitimation. We found inconclusive results over monarchies and personalistic regimes, opening fields for further research. Following with political structure, having celebrated a plebiscite in the past clearly affects the chances of holding a plebiscite in the present, which also holds our hypotheses and goes along with the reasoning of 'momentum' of political structures.

Attending socioeconomical issues, we found that natural resources lower the chances of holding a plebiscite, which also agrees with the hypotheses we stated, and with the previous research in natural resources by Wright, Frantz and Geddes (2014) or Gandhi and Przeworski (2006, 2007). This may hint that plebiscites are also tools for policies in a similar way than political pseudo democratic institutions which foster regime survival.

While we found that urbanization raises the chances of holding a plebiscite, GDP lowers them. This opposite direction suggests that plebiscites and democratization follow different paths, and may not be perfectly attached—at least in the sphere of autocracies—.The positive sign of the urbanization index may have a clear explanation: is easier to hold a plebiscite in countries where population are concentrated that in countries where population is scattered over the territory. Finally, interstate violence seems to lower the chances of holding a plebiscite, but internal violence gives inconclusive results. Since its interpretation was difficult from start, this may hint that regimes with political turmoil and plebiscites are not apparently connected. Further research in this area should be advisable.

This study, should be said, has limitations in various senses. Measuring and estimating an unlikely event in cross section time series data may offer promising results, but statistical difficulties arise in every sense. We tried to offer a model as simpler as possible, while offering also an intuitive and useful modelization. Of course, more complex models could be available, and maybe this is also a field of further study. As well, expansion of the data frame and timespan could offer a more solid base to the conclusions extracted. In any way, our intentions were to offer a model as better as possible given the natural restrictions of statistical studies.

Connecting with our anecdote of the Francoist 'National Referendum Law', our findings may not suggest that autocracies hold plebiscites for the best service of the nation, but for the best service of the autocratic survival and its regime political institutions.

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