

Left-Wing Authoritarianism: Origins, Evolution, and Decay

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Abstract

More than thirty years after the end of the Cold War, when the world was sharply divided into communist and capitalist camps, does it still make sense to differentiate authoritarian regimes by their right-wing or left-wing orientation? Given the authoritarian regimes literature's turn away from ideology and toward institutions, the much-touted "extinction" of Marxist-Leninist regimes across Eastern Europe and the global South, and the practical conflation of "authoritarian" and "right-wing" orientations in the political psychology literature, one might think the answer is no. We argue in this Element that dictatorships originating behind left-wing ideology are fundamentally different from those born with a right-wing bent, and that these differences tend to outlast the exhaustion of these regimes' founding ideologies. After distinguishing left-wing regimes from right-wing regimes by their gains-oriented rather than threat-oriented ideology, we argue that Machiavellianism has always been and remains today a more fundamental and enduring feature of left-wing authoritarianism than Marxism, Leninism, or Maoism. We trace the origins and variants of left-wing authoritarianism to the three great social revolutions of the first half of the 20th century: the Mexican, Russian, and Chinese. Although left-wing dictatorships have certainly evolved and typically decayed since the Cold War's end, we argue that they still carry important marks of their origins as mass-mobilizing regimes seeking to destroy traditional hierarchies through a monopoly on political organization and power.

Introduction

The recent profusion of political science research on authoritarian regimes has largely neglected the question of ideology. This marks a striking departure from the Cold War era's overwhelming and, in retrospect, excessive focus on differentiating authoritarian regimes by their right-wing vs. left-wing character. While most contemporary authoritarian regimes and severely backsliding democracies exhibit right-wing characteristics, and political psychology treats authoritarian predispositions, attitudes, orientations, and personalities as right-wing virtually by definition, authoritarian regimes have historically been left-wing as well as right-wing phenomena. And prominent regimes with historical left-wing origins – most importantly, China – have not vanished from the world stage. Left-wing authoritarian regimes are far from monolithic in their ideologies and approaches to governance, however. How have left-wing authoritarian regimes varied in comparison to right-wing authoritarian regimes and to each other? And how have left-wing authoritarian regimes evolved and endured, even after the Cold War?

This Element offers a novel analytical framework for distinguishing left-wing from right-wing authoritarianism, grounded in a microfoundational focus on threat-orientation vs. gains-orientation. This establishes the importance of examining left-wing authoritarian regimes as their own category, but to analyze variation among left-wing authoritarian regimes, we then distinguish among three types of left-wing authoritarian political programs and governance: Marxist-Leninist, Machiavellian, and Maoist. We trace the historical origins and evolution of

these types of left-wing authoritarian regimes from the canonical examples of the Russian, Mexican, and Chinese revolutions to the present day, showing how these different models were adopted and adapted globally during and after the Cold War. While a Marxist emphasis on benefiting the masses was common, the main trend we chart is the shift from more Marxist-Leninist and Maoist leftism during the Cold War era to a more flexible, Machiavellian brand of authoritarian leftism after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Even as their initial ideological commitments to leveling entrenched hierarchies have decayed, authoritarian regimes with left-wing origins continue to show marked divergence from their right-wing counterparts in at least two key respects: 1) their greater tendency toward a Leninist model of political monopoly and regime closure; and 2) their more hostile stances toward the US-led post-Cold War geopolitical order.

Throughout the Element, we discuss case examples from around the world, informed by primary documents, secondary literature, and our own research experience traversing Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This broad comparative approach shows the historical trajectories of left-wing authoritarianism and its relation to contemporary democratic erosion and deepening authoritarianism in a variety of countries, beyond the European focus of much work on communist and post-communist regimes.

Contributions

This Element offers a new perspective on debates about 1) global authoritarianism and ideology; 2) democratic erosion and autocratization; and 3) communist regimes and their legacies. The end of the Cold War was viewed as communism's defeat and demise as a political force (e.g. Jowitt 1992). Comparative studies since the end of the Cold War have often downplayed left-right ideological divides' importance in shaping authoritarian regimes' behavior or for distinguishing among them in favor of marco-theoretical institutional or political-psychological explanations (Svolik 2012; Gerschewski 2023). Our Element shows, however, that authoritarian regimes with left-wing roots have continued to share a similar logic of pursuing gains and leveling hierarchies in their public appeals and of anti-imperialism in their international relations, distinct from right-wing regimes. Beneath these similar ideological foundations, however, we show how left-wing authoritarian regimes have taken different approaches in their political programs domestically and internationally. Furthermore, despite post-Cold War pressures for democratization and economic liberalization (Levitsky and Way 2010), we show that many left-wing authoritarian regimes that shifted to competitive authoritarianism have since doubled back and autocratized once more, while Latin America's 'left turn' and Venezuela's 'Bolivarian Revolution' (e.g. Cameron and Hershberg 2010; Corrales and Penfold 2015; Levitsky and Roberts 2011) opened up a new electoral path toward left-wing authoritarianism through democratic erosion.

Recent comparative work on democratic erosion and autocratization, meanwhile, has often lumped authoritarian-minded politicians and parties of different ideological stripes together (Haggard and Kaufman 2021), concentrating on characteristics like populism (Bartels 2023; Weyland 2024) or personalism (Frantz, Taylor, and Wright 2024), or offered overarching explanations like polarization (Stokes 2025) or weak institutional resistance and collaboration (Levitsky and Way 2018) to explain when erosion happens or autocratization succeeds. We show

ideology's importance, however, for understanding left-wing parties' and regimes' political and economic appeals, sources of legitimacy, and ability to survive. Beyond Latin America, regional studies of democratic erosion or autocratization have also tended not to focus on left-wing regimes (Mietzner 2021; Arriola, Rakner, and van de Walle 2023), but our work examines the history and recent trajectories of left-wing authoritarianism around the world.

Finally, our Element pushes comparative research on communist regimes and their legacies in a new direction by offering a typology of left-wing authoritarian regimes during the Cold War, which followed either the Marxist-Leninist example of the Soviet Union, the Machiavellian example of Mexico, or the Maoist example of China. Most post-Cold War research on communist regimes and their legacies has focused on Asia and Eastern Europe (Beissinger and Kotkin 2014; Dimitrov 2013, 2023; Grzymala-Busse 2002; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017), viewing Cuba as an exception and neglecting left-wing authoritarian regimes' endurance in Africa and the Sandinista regime's resurgence in Nicaragua.

1. *Why Look Left?*

The first section lays out why it remains important to examine left-wing authoritarianism's roots and its contemporary manifestations, despite the greater threat posed today by right-wing authoritarianism and regimes and movements promoting it, and despite the near-evaporation of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist rhetoric as foundational legitimating principles for the world's authoritarian regimes.

2. *Threats and Gains: Microfoundations of Left vs. Right-Wing Authoritarianism*

We present a framework for understanding the foundational logics of left-wing versus right-wing authoritarian regimes: gains-orientation versus threat-orientation, respectively. While right-wing authoritarian regimes seek total power to counter what they deem threats to society and idealized existing or 'traditional' ways of life, left-wing authoritarian regimes promise to level hierarchies to secure new gains for the masses, which can only be achieved with full control of the state. We draw on key ideological texts from left-wing and selected right-wing parties and regimes and on the secondary literature to empirically illustrate how they have presented their aims and discussed control of the state. This framework helps distinguish among authoritarian regimes across ideologies, and offers insights into the enduring popular appeal of many left-wing authoritarian regimes.

3. *Machiavellian Authoritarianism: Revolutionary Roots and Varieties of 20th-Century Left-Wing Authoritarian Regimes*

This section examines the historical development of three families of left-wing authoritarian regimes during the 20th century. The first, emerging from the Bolshevik Revolution, paired Marxism with Leninism to establish communist states, with a second subfamily then developing following the Maoist model of peasant-based revolution pioneered in China, which offered a broader popular base in more agrarian, less-industrialized countries in the Global South. The third, emerging from the Mexican

Revolution, embraced leftist ideals of benefiting the masses, but was willing to entertain greater flexibility economically and in international relations while stubbornly refusing to countenance meaningful checks on the ruling party's hegemonic power. We depict such regimes as Machiavellian due to their echoing of the theorist's emphasis on 1) tactical flexibility, 2) coercion of opposition, and 3) rule through the *popoli* (people) instead of the *grandi* (elites). As the next section discusses, regimes may start out with one model of left-wing authoritarianism and shift to another—and potentially back again.

4. *Left-Wing Authoritarianism after 'the Leninist Extinction'*

Left-wing authoritarianism's heyday might have ended with the Soviet Union's collapse, yet left-wing authoritarian regimes and ideals have endured. We discuss how post-Cold War left-wing authoritarian regimes have taken three forms: unrepentant single-party regimes in countries like China and Cuba; Cold War-era left-wing authoritarian regimes that liberalized but then reversed towards single-party autocracy in countries like Cambodia and Mozambique; and left-wing populist movements that eroded democracy in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and more briefly in Bolivia and Ecuador. In the initial post-Cold War era, it appeared that the days of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist left-wing authoritarian regimes were numbered and that there was a shift in a more Machiavellian direction. Yet despite shifts economically toward capitalism, single-party regimes have survived and retained their Marxist-Leninist and Maoist roots. Liberalizing dominant-party regimes and enduring left-wing populist regimes, meanwhile, have more recently abandoned competitive elections and broader international relations in favor of a return to Cold War mindsets. In the 2010s and 2020s, declining international pro-democracy pressure and the availability of Chinese and Russian support has helped left-wing authoritarian regimes endure and often return toward more centralized, restrictive modes of ruling.

5. *Conclusion*

The conclusion revisits left-wing authoritarianism's place in the contemporary literature on authoritarianism and democratic erosion. We examine potential directions for future research, as well as assessing the prospects for left-wing movements today either sliding towards authoritarianism or resisting its temptations, including in the world's wealthiest democracies.

Author Information

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