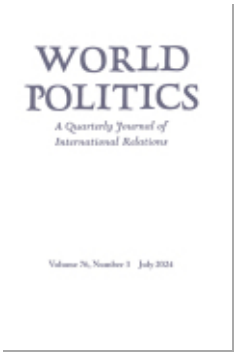
Elite Management before Autocratic Leader Succession: Evidence from North Korea



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ELITE MANAGEMENT BEFORE AUTOCRATIC LEADER SUCCESSION
Evidence from North Korea

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ABSTRACT

How do dictators prepare for succession? Scholars have studied the determinants of succession, but we know little about the mechanisms, including elite management, of how succession occurs. The authors argue that incumbents prepare for succession by building a power base of elites outside their inner circle, for their preferred successor; doing so helps the successor to stabilize the regime. The authors test this argument by examining preparations for succession in the prominent but puzzling case of North Korea under Kim Jong Il, leveraging the plausibly exogenous shock that Kim suffered—a stroke—that caused him to prepare for succession. Quantitative analysis of 1,573 leadership events under Kim between 1994 and 2011, with original biographical data on 230 North Korean elites, supports the argument. Qualitative evidence of elites' roles after Kim's death is consistent with the argument's logic. Rather than being atypical, as North Korea is often portrayed, the findings apply to other personalist autocracies.

It is the height of fortune, pride, and luck for our party and people to put forth Comrade Kim Jong Un as the leader to succeed the cause of the 'Juche' revolution. Accepting Comrade Kim Jong Un is the decisive guarantee of all victories in this regard.

"김정은동지를 주체혁명위 업을 계승해 나갈 령도자로 내세운것은 우리 당과 인민의 더없는 행운이고 자랑이며 영광 입니다. 김정은동지를 잘 받들어 나가는 여기 에 모든 승리의결정적 담보가 있습니다."

—Kim Jong Il 2011[1]

I. Introduction

POLITICAL scientists have long been interested in autocratic leader succession, initially suggesting that it destabilizes autocracies.[2] However, many regimes have recently conducted peaceful leadership transitions.

[1] J. I. Kim 2015, 425; *Juche* refers to "being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one's own country"; G. D. Lee 2002, 105.
[2] Herz 1952, 20–21; Huntington 1965, 396; Olson 1993, 571–72.

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In post–Cold War Asia for instance, North Korea has managed it twice, with further transitions in Cambodia (one), China (three), Indonesia (one), Kazakhstan (one), Lao (three), Malaysia (three), Myanmar (one), Singapore (two), Turkmenistan (two), Uzbekistan (one), and Vietnam (four).[3] Concurrently, scholars have shown empirically how autocrats use institutional strategies to ensure succession.[4]

We build on this research by asking: How do dictators manage elites to prepare for succession? Our study adds to prior work, which focuses on how institutional factors affect succession, by examining how dictators manage the personnel that make up an autocratic regime. To summarize our argument, we posit that incumbents prepare for succession by building a power base for the successor among elites who are outside the incumbent's inner circle. No dictator rules alone; successors require a power base to stabilize the regime so that they can keep providing the functions of autocratic governance without disruption. Relying on incumbent-era elites for a power base, however, would be risky for the successor. These elites are comparatively strong, having spent significant time proximate to the regime's center of power. On the other hand, empowering elites who are outside the incumbent's inner circle negates this sovereign's dilemma—when a coherent group of elites facilitates a strong state but threatens the leader's tenure—because the career trajectories of these elites become tied to the successor's rise. Elites who are outside the incumbent's inner circle but whose fortunes rise drastically prior to the succession are likely to support the successor. Because our argument relies on an incumbent being able to manipulate the status of elites, it primarily applies to personalistic dictators; we later provide suggestive evidence that the argument otherwise applies irrespective of ideology, institutional makeup, or whether the succession is hereditary.

We test our theory on the prominent but puzzling case of North Korea, when Kim Jong Il was preparing for succession to Kim Jong Un. Prior to Kim Jong Il's death, experts were skeptical about Kim Jong Un's ability to survive, let alone consolidate power.[5] For example, in a December 2011 *New York Times* op-ed titled "China's Newest Province?" former director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, Victor Cha, wrote that whether North Korea "comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together

[3] Succession entails a leadership change in which the outgoing leader retires due to ill health, dies a natural death, or an otherwise regular transition occurs; Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021.

[4] Kokkonen and Sundell 2014; Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022; Meng 2020; Meng 2021.

[5] Byman and Lind 2010, 72; Bennett and Lind 2011, 84; Gause 2011, 113.

after the untimely death of its leader."[6] Unlike when Kim Jong Il came to power after years of preparation, Kim Jong Un was relatively young with limited exposure to North Korean elite politics.[7] So how did Kim Jong Il create the conditions for North Korea to pull off a (second) peaceful succession?

Studying Kim Jong Il's preparations for succession in North Korea also provides a rare opportunity to assess how a dictator preparing for succession affects ruling coalition management. A dictator's decision to prepare for succession is usually endogenous to his relationship with the ruling coalition. However, in August 2008, Kim suffered a stroke. Experts on North Korea concur that this plausibly exogenous shock sparked Kim into planning for succession to Kim Jong Un. We therefore identify Kim's preparations for succession as the time between his stroke in 2008 and his death in 2011.

We examine ruling coalition management in North Korea with an original data set on elites' appearances at leadership events. These events are public and were attended by Kim Jong Il and usually one or more elites within the regime.[8] Dictators such as Kim use invitations to events to influence the power of elites; analyzing attendance patterns therefore provides insights into how dictators manipulate intra-elite power relations. We analyze elite attendance at leadership events using an original data set of all 1,573 of these events in North Korea under Kim Jong Il between July 1994 and November 2011. We also introduce novel biographical data on the 230 elites who attended leadership events under Kim Jong Il. These include fine-grained data to identify elites' roles and responsibilities, which we use to proxy who was inside (military elites) and outside (party elites) Kim's inner circle at the time of his stroke. Overall, we use these data to model how Kim changed his management of the ruling coalition before (July 1994–August 2008) and during (October 2008–November 2011) his preparations for succession.[9]

Consistent with the argument, we find that Kim was more likely to invite elites who had been outside his inner circle to leadership events after his stroke, when he was preparing for succession. Placebo tests corroborate this finding, as do robustness tests including a strict regression discontinuity in time design. We therefore infer that Kim's management

[6] Cha 2011.

[7] Ishiyama and Kim 2020, 166.

[8] "Public" means events are recorded by North Korean state media; it does not mean that anyone can attend.

[9] The samples of elites are similar in the pre- and poststroke periods except for elites who died, or in the case of one, defected; see section III.

of party elites changed because he was preparing for succession. Qualitative evidence from the careers of party elites in the early years of Kim Jong Un's tenure is consistent with the argument's logic that Kim built a power base comprising party elites to help Kim Jong Un stabilize the regime. We have reasons to doubt plausible alternative explanations, including that Kim Jong Il was coup-proofing the regime to guard against vulnerability following his stroke.[10]

The article contributes to two distinct bodies of literature. First, the study contributes to research on comparative authoritarianism, specifically how autocratic regimes endure. Research on authoritarian survival features many studies of how dictators avoid falling to irregular types of exits, especially at the hands of insider elites,[11] but also from the people[12] and from foreign states.[13] Yet succession is a common form of leadership transition in autocracies.[14] Several scholars have recently investigated the determinants of peaceful succession;[15] however, to quote Anne Meng, "[t]hough the politics of succession is considered to be one of the central challenges of autocratic rule, the mechanisms that facilitate peaceful leadership transitions are not well understood for modern dictatorships."[16] By providing an argument and evidence of how dictators prepare for succession, we contribute to knowledge about the endurance of authoritarian governance within the state.

Second, our article contributes to North Korean studies and further integrating North Korea within comparative authoritarianism. In addition to the data contributions described above, we show how Kim Jong Il enabled the transition to Kim Jong Un. North Korea observers agree that the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) played an important role in the transition,[17] but we know little about how Kim Jong Il elevated KWP officials or how this helped to ensure a peaceful transition.[18] We fill this gap by providing an explanation of how Kim Jong Il used KWP elites to ensure Kim Jong Un's position after the former's death. In addition,

[10] Marcum and Brown 2016.

[11] De Bruin 2020.

[12] Chin, Song, and Wright 2022.

[13] Grauvogel and Soest 2014.

[14] One-hundred and fifty-three successions occurred between 1946 and 2012 using Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018 to identify autocracies; Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009 to identify leaders; and Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021 to identify successions. For comparison, Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021 identify 179 regime change and leader reshuffling coups in the same timeframe; this comparison is notable because coups are the most common irregular way that dictators leave office; Svolik 2012, 5.

[15] Kokkonen and Sundell 2014; Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022; Meng 2020; Meng 2021.

[16] Meng 2020, 206.

[17] Gause 2011, chap. 6; Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014.

[18] Gause 2011, 118, observes that "[h]ow Kim Chong-il secured the initial support for his chosen successor is not really known."

while North Korea has traditionally been viewed as idiosyncratic, scholars have recently demonstrated the applicability of comparative theory to explain North Korean politics.[19] We build on this scholarship by leveraging the North Korean context to employ a research design that enables us to test a novel theory about authoritarian survival that has comparative applications.

The next section posits that incumbents prepare for succession by building a power base for the successor from elites who are outside the incumbent's inner circle. Section III describes the research design, including the North Korean context, data, hypotheses, and estimation strategy. Section IV provides the quantitative results. Section V probes the argument's logic. Section VI concludes by discussing comparative applications, the study's implications, and avenues for future research.

II. Theory: Incumbents Prepare for Succession by Building a Power Base for the Successor

A growing body of empirical research shows that incumbents use primarily institutional solutions to stabilize their regime against the future shadow of succession.[20] These studies assess evidence from Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and a global sample of post–World War II nonmonarchical regimes to explore how incumbents solve the thorny issue of succession. For example, examining forty-two European states between 1000 and 1800, Andrej Kokkonen and Anders Sundell show that succession based on agnatic primogeniture—the oldest son inheriting power—reduces the likelihood of monarchs being deposed. This argument encapsulates the themes in these studies about how institutionalized rules can facilitate succession: they bring clarity and predictability to an otherwise unstable situation, thereby dissuading elites from challenging the incumbent.[21]

However, incumbents care about succession for reasons beyond stabilizing their rule.[22] If the incumbent has not died, a handpicked successor can protect the incumbent from arrest or execution after leaving office.[23] Incumbents also often care about protecting their family and allies after

[19] Koo, Choi, and Kim 2016; H. Lee 2018; Mahdavi and Ishiyama 2020; McEachern 2018; Song and Wright 2018.

[20] Brownlee 2007a; Frantz and Stein 2017; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014; Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022; Kurrild-Klitgaard 2000; Meng 2020, chap. 7; Meng 2021.

[21] Kokkonen and Sundell 2014.

[22] Wong and Chan 2021, 595; c.f. Meng 2020, 207; Meng 2021, 958; Shih 2022, 23.

[23] Goemans 2008, 772.

their departure, as well as preserving their legacy.[24] For example, before succeeding Mahathir Mohamad in 2003, knowing it was important to Mahathir, Abdullah Badawi told him that, "'My vision for Malaysia is Vision 2020,' which was Dr. Mahathir's blueprint."[25] For these reasons, incumbents do not just desire regime stability before the succession; they also want stability after they have gone and the successor has taken over.

Incumbents therefore often seek to empower the successor for the time that he takes power to achieve the goals described in the previous paragraph. If the successor is not empowered, then instability may ensue. Meng observes that power vacuums after a leader's death can invite coups or civil war as elites fight to become the incumbent.[26] In a less extreme scenario, a successor may hold de jure power, but if they lack de facto power then challenges from elites are more likely because elites would view the successor as weak. A successor who is viewed as being weak can also precipitate agitation from actors outside the regime—that is, the people or a foreign state—who seek to capitalize on regime weakness.[27] In short, successors experience instability when they are insufficiently empowered to govern effectively. Incumbents therefore seek to empower the successor so that he can stabilize the regime by continuing to provide the functions of autocratic governance. This subsequently helps the successor to deter, or at least to overcome, challenges within and outside the regime.

Many tactics exist that successors can use to empower themselves once in office. For instance, successors can purge elites to consolidate power, as Kim Jong Un did when he purged the military elite Ri Yong Ho in 2012, and his uncle and prominent party elite Jang Song Thaek in 2013.[28] However, how incumbents manage elites before successors come to power also plays a crucial role in affecting the regime's internal distribution of power once successors take over. In Brazil's military dictatorship, Ernesto Geisel's manipulation of civilian and military elites was crucial in facilitating regime stability once his preferred successor, João Figueiredo, had come to power.[29] The management of elites is a critical consideration for incumbents as they scheme to engineer regime stability in the postsuccession environment.

That no dictator governs alone is a well-known aphorism.[30] Dictators require a power base of trusted elites who can help them to nullify threats

[24] Lachapelle et al. 2020, 591.
[25] Wain 2009, 307.
[26] Meng 2020, 208; see also Frantz and Stein 2017; Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022.
[27] Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2017; Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022, 19.
[28] T. Kim 2021.
[29] Skidmore 1988, chaps. 6–7.
[30] Svolik 2012, 79.

within the regime, to control the people, and to navigate threats from foreign states; these are the primary sources of threat to an autocrat's survival.[31] In North Korea, the regime's founding leader Kim Il Sung relied especially on elites who had fought alongside him as guerrillas in Manchuria during the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula.[32] A power base of trusted elites is essential for all dictators, including successors, to help them wield the infrastructural power of the state. This is "the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm."[33] Put differently, dictators require support from elites to enforce their will across the polity, thereby stabilizing the regime and ensuring their continued rule.

Incumbents therefore prepare for succession by building a power base for their successor. This helps the successor, once in office, gain control of the state to govern and subsequently maintain power.[34] To emphasize, the incumbent does not build a power base for the successor for tasks such as counterbalancing incumbent-era elites or the military once the successor is in power;[35] although the power base helps the successor to avoid falling to a coup, it does not do so via traditional means of coup-proofing.[36] Rather, a power base helps the successor to command the infrastructural power of the state, helping the dictator harness the state's coercive apparatus to maintain control over the people and persuade incumbent-era elites to refrain from obstruction.[37] Thus, a power base helps a successor to avoid falling to a coup by helping the successor continue to deliver the functions of autocratic governance that are essential to the regime's stability.

When the incumbent builds a power base for the successor, he empowers elites early on who will make up this power base. These elites then have the necessary clout within the regime to enact the successor's directives. To empower elites, dictators often bestow prestigious tasks upon them, either through formal roles or by involving them in public displays of governance. These strategies signal an elite's importance within the regime and help them to develop expertise. In Egypt, for example, before he was assassinated, Anwar Sadat prepared for succession

[31] Svolik 2012, 4–5.
[32] Lankov 2013, chap. 1.
[33] Mann 1984, 189; see also: Slater 2003; Wang 2022.
[34] Meng 2021, 963, similarly emphasizes the importance of elites supporting the successor, but while she focuses on how this helps successors to come to power, we highlight the role elite support plays in empowering the successor so that he can govern and maintain power.
[35] De Bruin 2020.
[36] Quinlivan 1999.
[37] Gerschewski 2013, 21–22.

to Hosni Mubarak. Key elites were empowered to establish a support base for Mubarak. This group included Abu Ghazala, who gained valuable experience dealing with the United States as the defense attaché to Washington between 1976 and 1979. Ghazala was then a key ally for Mubarak as defense minister from 1981 to 1989.[38] The idea that dictators can empower elites has been noted in prior research. Kokkonen, Jørgen Møller, and Sundell describe how autocrats can empower elites, writing that "[i]t seems as if the dictator is often able to decide how much to empower the elite."[39] Building on this, incumbents do not empower elites in general to prepare for succession; instead, they empower specific elites to form a new power base for the successor to help him govern once in office.

In deciding which elites to tap for the successor's power base, incumbents must be careful not to trigger the sovereign's dilemma. Yuhua Wang describes how a "coherent elite helps the ruler strengthen the state, but threatens his survival."[40] Wang's argument suggests that the incumbent building a power base to strengthen the successor's grip over the state's infrastructural power could strengthen the state but threaten the successor's survival. Incumbents therefore cannot construct a power base for the successor from incumbent-era elites. These elites have garnered status and prominence via their presence in the regime's upper echelons of power and through their interactions with the incumbent. Incumbent-era elites have had the chance to develop important relationships with other prominent elites, as well as to acquire significant material resources based on their proximity to the regime's center of power. Successors are generally not impotent when they arrive in office,[41] but if they have to rely on incumbent-era elites, they are vulnerable to being captured—that is, elites may force their preferences on the successor or they may even overthrow the successor. When Park Chung-hee was assassinated in South Korea in 1979, his prime minister, Choi Kyu-ha, became president. Despite his former position, Choi was a career bureaucrat with no power base.[42] In less than seven weeks, the powerful Park-era elite and head of the Military Security Command, Chun Doo-hwan, instigated a military coup to become South Korea's de facto leader.[43]

[38] Springborg 1987, 6.
[39] Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022, 221.
[40] Wang 2022, 13.
[41] Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022, 114; Meng 2020, 209.
[42] C. S. Lee 1980, 70.
[43] Kim and Larson 1988, 87. Meng 2021, 962–63, similarly discusses Felix Houphouet-Boigny's less-than resounding endorsement of Konan Bédié in the Ivory Coast, and the consequences this had six years later when he was removed by military figures with ties to Alassane Ouattara, Houphouet-Boigny's prime minister.

Incumbents therefore alleviate the sovereign's dilemma by building a power base for their preferred successor from elites who are outside their inner circle. These elites are not unimportant; they could be deputy ministers in a party regime or princes in a monarchy who do not sit on the primary governing council. In Kim Jong Il's North Korea in 2008, examples include Kim's brother-in-law Jang Song Thaek, who was then not in Kim's good graces having been purged in 2004,[44] or the KWP official Pak To Chun, who had only been the party secretary for Chagang Province in the northwest since 2005; both became prominent in the post-stroke period.[45] Regardless of their professional history or demographic characteristics, individuals chosen for the successor's power base are not members of the incumbent's inner circle when the incumbent decides to prepare for succession.

Building a power base of elites outside the incumbent's inner circle alleviates the sovereign's dilemma for the successor.[46] The rapid elevation of these elites motivates them to support the successor for two reasons. First, the rise of these elites is tied to the successor's ascension. Elites brought into a power base from outside the incumbent's inner circle are motivated to help the successor govern and solidify his position; that it was the incumbent rather than the successor who orchestrated their increasing prominence does not matter because their rise in fortunes is indelibly linked to the successor's continued primacy.[47] The removal or weakening of the successor would threaten the newfound fortunes of these elites. Second, any challenge from these elites to the successor stands a low chance of success. These elites' newfound status in the regime's center of power means that they have had little chance to develop strong vertical relationships with junior officials or strong horizontal relationships with fellow elites who might support them in a power grab.[48] Elites are unlikely to challenge the successor if they believe they have low likelihood of success since the costs of a failed challenge are so high.[49] Thus, building a power base of elites from outside the incumbent's inner circle helps the successor to wield the infrastructural power of the state while not threatening the successor's personal survival,[50] thereby circumventing the sovereign's dilemma.[51]

[44] Ra 2019, 121–26.
[45] Relatedly, see Shih 2022, 11–12.
[46] Wang 2022.
[47] Weeks 2008, 41.
[48] Goldring and Matthews 2023.
[49] Finer 1962.
[50] Mann 1984.
[51] Wang 2022.

This strategy is not without risks. First, empowering a successor who need not be the incumbent's son could trigger the crown-prince problem, in which the successor has the "motive and opportunity to mount a coup."[52] Second, increasing the size of the ruling coalition—a side effect for the incumbent of building a power base for the successor, while not necessarily purging incumbent-era elites (see below)—could be dangerous since it decreases the value of membership of the ruling coalition; this tactic is risky in autocracies because leaders engender loyalty through private goods provision.[53] Third, incumbent-era elites may react negatively if they believe they are being marginalized by the elevation of an alternative power base for the successor.[54] Elite infighting could destabilize the regime as a whole, potentially morphing into open conflict, even civil war.[55]

However, logical reasons exist to explain why these possible costs are outweighed by the benefits of this strategy. Taking these points in turn, empowering a successor could trigger the crown-prince problem, but this issue is unlikely for the same reason that certain institutional approaches tend not to be. For example, Meng describes how identifying a successor via constitutional rules mitigates the crown-prince problem because, "once named, the designated successor has a strong incentive to protect the existing regime."[56] The noninstitutional strategy of developing the successor's power base is similarly unlikely to trigger the crown-prince problem because the successor knows that the incumbent is working to solidify their future. Then, contrary to the possible risks of a larger ruling coalition highlighted by selectorate theory, coup attempts are in fact less likely with larger ruling coalitions.[57] This point brings us to a related one—that incumbent-era elites may react negatively to the emergence of an alternative power base. However, structural features of personalistic regimes—the subtype of autocracy to which our argument applies—make this unlikely. Elites in these regimes have imperfect information about the dictator's goals and behaviors, including whether he is altering the intraregime balance of power. This gap in information, combined with the risks of mounting a challenge, make it costly for elites to try to stop the dictator. Dictators in personalist regimes can therefore

[52] Kokkonen and Sundell 2014, 440; Herz 1952, 30.
[53] Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003.
[54] Svolik 2012, 59.
[55] Roessler 2011.
[56] Meng 2021, 952.
[57] Marcum and Brown 2016. We later show that our finding that Kim Jong Il built a power base for Kim Jong Un is robust to accounting for this alternative possibility that Kim Jong Il increased the size of the ruling coalition to mitigate the possibility of a coup when he was vulnerable after his stroke.

manipulate elites' statuses with a low risk of a challenge by incumbent-era elites.[58]

Incumbents sometimes even marginalize prominent elites while developing a power base for their successor, but whether they do this is conditional on perceptions of the dictator's strength among elites. Marginalizing elites through purges may seem appealing, for instance, because it removes potential rivals to the successor; in Syria, Hafez al-Assad sought to secure Bashir al-Assad's succession in part by purging military elites who were opposed to the succession or had poor relations with Bashir.[59] However, purging elites can precipitate a backlash.[60] For example, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe was removed from office when he attempted to purge powerful elites to strengthen the position of his preferred successor.[61] Mugabe's old age and ill health signaled his impending departure and reduced the costs of challenging him.[62] Thus, whether incumbents prepare for succession by also purging incumbent-era elites is dependent on the perceived strength of the dictator among elites. But even for dictators like Kim Jong Il, who was visibly weakened when preparing for succession, the structural conditions of personalistic autocracy mean that they can elevate a power base with a low risk of incumbent-era elites reacting negatively. For incumbent-era elites, being compelled to share the spotlight within the regime is considerably more palatable than being jailed or executed, the likely outcomes of a failed attempt to challenge the incumbent.

The argument that incumbents prepare for a transition by creating a power base for the successor builds on recent research on the determinants of succession. First, our claim that incumbents empower a successor echoes arguments about how institutions facilitate succession. Meng argues that constitutional rules that identify the vice president as the successor increase stability before the transition "by empowering the designated successor."[63] Second, prior work describes how successors undergo a grooming process.[64] Analogously, by becoming more prominent and attaining greater status during preparations for succession, we argue that certain elites are also groomed to prepare them to become members of the successor's power base. Third, our claim that ruling coalition membership is likely to change prior to succession complements arguments

[58] Svolik 2012, 55–60.
[59] Leverett 2005, 62.
[60] Sudduth 2017.
[61] Beardsworth, Cheeseman, and Tinhu 2019.
[62] Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2017.
[63] Meng 2021, 953.
[64] Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022, 29, 114; Meng 2021.

about elite management around the time of succession. Scholars have described how the ruling coalition is likely to change once a new ruler succeeds.[65] We suggest that if planning is possible—that is, if the incumbent does not die unexpectedly—consequential changes in elite management also occur before the transition.[66]

III. Research Design

Leader Succession in North Korea

We leverage the case of Kim Jong Il's North Korea to study the effects of a dictator preparing for leader succession on his management of the ruling coalition. Kim became North Korea's leader in 1994 after the death of his 82-year-old father, Kim Il Sung, the regime's first leader. Kim Jong Il was 53 when he became the second Supreme Leader, having been the designated successor since February 1974.[67]

Kim Jong Il's leadership was a tumultuous time for the country. Coming to power soon after the Cold War, he had to navigate the disappearance of many fraternal communist regimes including the USSR, which had provided North Korea with a large amount of discounted fuel and other aid.[68] The disappearance of Soviet aid contributed to a preventable famine in the mid-1990s that killed between six hundred thousand and a million North Koreans.[69] Despite these events, Kim maintained power. He conducted North Korea's first nuclear weapons test in 2006, but then, in August 2008, he suffered a major stroke. Kim ultimately died of a heart attack in December 2011.

North Korea provides a rare opportunity to assess the effects of a dictator planning for leader succession on ruling coalition management. The strategic interactions between a dictator and his ruling coalition usually represent a methodological barrier to assessing the effects of a dictator's actions on ruling coalition management. However, the circumstances surrounding Kim's stroke make his decision to plan for leader succession plausibly exogenous to his relationships with elites in his ruling coalition. Kim's stroke shocked him into preparing for succession when he

[65] Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022, 113; Svolik 2012, 198.

[66] Meng 2020, 309, similarly notes that successors can build alliances ahead of the transition. We concur but restrict this article's scope to the actions that incumbents take to facilitate the successor's ascension.

[67] Lankov 2013, 68; Lim 2008, chap. 3.

[68] Eberstadt, Rubin, and Tretyakova 1995, 99–100.

[69] Noland 2016, 240.

had not done so previously.[70] For instance, prior to 2008, Kim Jong Un did not receive any of the official titles and positions that would have enabled him to establish an independent power base.[71]

Much analysis of North Korean politics revolves around the Kim family. However, elites, especially military elites under Kim Jong Il, possess significant power.[72] Actions were therefore taken to boost Kim Jong Un's standing within the military. A propaganda campaign in the military from December 2008 preceded Kim Jong Un being named a four-star general by April 2009.[73] Members of the security services, including the military, were required to swear allegiance to Kim Jong Un in early 2009. Then, in the latter half of 2009, heads of the military's General Political Bureau and other security institutions began reporting to Kim Jong Un.[74] Kim Jong Un is also believed to have overseen several military actions to test whether the military would respond to him. The sinking in March 2010 of the Cheonan, a South Korean warship, and the November 2010 shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island are thought to have been ordered by Kim Jong Un in part to quiet voices of discontent about the succession and ensure the military would obey him.[75]

Numerous authors connect Kim Jong Il's efforts to prepare for succession to the resurgence of the KWP as an institution. Initially it appeared as though the military, especially the Korean People's Army (KPA), would be the foundation for the succession. However, the KWP was subsequently the main vehicle through which Kim Jong Un's legitimacy stemmed. KWP cadres increasingly occupied prominent positions in important KPA and KWP bodies, including in the Central Military Commission, National Defense Commission (NDC), and the Politburo. These appointments helped to extend Kim Jong Un's influence over the country's then-primary institutions.[76]

[70] Appendix A in the supplementary material shows consensus on this point. Preparations were also never made for Kim's other children to succeed. The eldest, Kim Jong Nam, was exiled after being arrested at Tokyo's airport in 2001 for using a fake passport; he claimed he was visiting Disneyland. Kim's sushi chef from 1988 to 2001, Kenji Fujimoto (2003, 227–28) said the next eldest, Kim Jong Chol, was never the successor, while the youngest, Kim Yo Jong, is female and four years younger than Kim Jong Un.

[71] For comparison, Kim Il Sung publicly named Kim Jong Il as his successor as early as 1980, and in 1991 named him commander of the People's Army. Kim Jong Il was privately named successor in 1974, and he used his position as director of the then–Organization Department to cultivate a network of loyal followers and gain access to intra–Korean Workers' Party intelligence; Lim 2008.

[72] Gause 2011, chap. 6.

[73] Cheong 2010, 169; H. Kim 2015, 179; Thae 2018, 277.

[74] Cheong 2010, 171.

[75] Gause 2011, 167; Gause 2015, 165 fn. 357; Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014, 776; H. Kim 2015, 176; Shin 2018, 200; Shin 2020, 57–66.

[76] Gause 2011, chap. 6; Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014.

These accounts identify the visible institutional traits of Kim Jong Il's preparations for succession, but they do not explain how Kim shifted the balance of power within the regime to ensure that his son could stabilize the regime after he was gone. Recent research on North Korea has explored elite personnel management by the Kims.[77] However, scholars focused on North Korea have not examined—nor to our knowledge have comparative scholars in broader contexts—how Kim Jong Il managed elite personnel to prepare for succession.

Data and Hypotheses

We test our theory using data on North Korean leadership events between July 1994 and November 2011, which covers Kim Jong Il's tenure. These events are public events attended by the dictator and usually one or more elites. They include on-the-spot guidance trips made by Kim—at anything from children's parks to shoe factories, or inspections of military units to missile tests—as well as major party-, state-, and military-related occasions. Data on events come from NK Pro, a platform run by Korea Risk Group, a leading media outlet on North Korea. NK Pro identifies which officials attended events from the North Korean state news agency, the Korean Central News Agency. We assess differences in patterns of elites' attendance at events before (July 1994–August 2008) and after Kim's stroke (October 2008–November 2011), which identify the periods before and during his preparations for succession.

Leadership events provide insights into a dictator's preparations for succession because dictators can use events to manipulate the balance of power within the regime. Researchers have shown the utility of studying leadership events to identify which elites are in or out of favor.[78] However, leadership events can provide even greater insights; they can be informative when studying how a dictator prepares for succession. Dictators can use events to shape the dynamics of authoritarian power sharing.[79] Events indicate what policy the leader is prioritizing;[80] an elite's appearance at an event therefore implies involvement in a leader's policy priority. By inviting certain elites to events, the leader not only can signal but actively increase an elite's relative power. Similarly, by frequently disinviting an elite, a dictator demonstrates the elite's relative lack of importance to his or her fellow elites, or that the elite is being purged.[81]

[77] Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014; Ishiyama 2014; Mahdavi and Ishiyama 2020.
[78] Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014; Mahdavi and Ishiyama 2020.
[79] Svolik 2012.
[80] I. Kim and Lee 2012; G. D. Lee 2002.
[81] For example, former Premier Park Pong Ju attended twenty-nine events in 2005, six in 2006, and was relieved from his positions in 2007.

We track the careers of KWP elites who Kim Jong Il elevated via these events, in the Kim Jong Un era, showing that elites' appearances at events precipitated changes in elites' de facto power. As Dale Herspring writes about Mikhail Gorbachev's decision to invite only four military officers, down from nine in the previous year, to accompany the political leadership at a parade in 1986 to mark the anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution, "symbolic representations of power are very important; such things do not happen by accident."[82] In systems in which it is difficult to identify power, even for those within the regime, the perception of power becomes power.[83]

Other ways exist to identify members of North Korea's ruling coalition, including using the membership of prominent institutions such as the Central Committee,[84] but limitations exist to such approaches. Applying an institutional approach, for instance, can lead to time delays in identifying an elite's prominence or marginalization; positions are often awarded or taken away to confirm rather than change status. Using leadership events to identify members of North Korea's ruling coalition is not a perfect strategy. For instance, prominent elites with secretive roles may rarely attend events.[85] Nevertheless, leadership events provide useful insights about how the leader manipulates intra-elite power relations.

Given our theoretical expectation—that an incumbent should integrate elites who were outside their inner circle to build a power base for the preferred successor—what patterns should we observe in elites' attendance at leadership events in North Korea before and after Kim's stroke? First, we identify incumbent-era elites in North Korea under Kim. Prior to 2008, military elites were more central in Kim Jong Il's inner circle than other types of elites. Joseph Wright's research on the structures of autocratic rule shows how different latent features vary over time within a regime.[86] In North Korea under Kim Jong Il prior to 2008, military politics were dominant. The shift to military elites in the ruling group occurred post-1991 as Kim Jong Il shifted his base of support as the country entered a period of crisis (famine). This shift had an ideological basis with the "military first" (*Songun*, 선군) ideology. *Songun* meant that the NDC's power outstripped its purview in the North's 1998 revised constitution, and it became "the de facto general

[82] Herspring 1987.
[83] Schedler and Hoffmann 2016, 97.
[84] T. Kim 2021.
[85] Although even elites who work in opaque areas in North Korea, such as nuclear weapons development (e.g., Jon Pyong Ho), still appear at events.
[86] Wright 2021.

administration."[87] This change was also reflected in the relative status of military elites within Kim's inner circle. For instance, elites in the KPA were Kim's "favored bodyguard."[88] Thus, because prior to 2008 military elites were central to the ruling coalition, we identify military elites as incumbent-era elites.

Conversely, we identify party officials as elites who were relatively outside of Kim Jong Il's inner circle.[89] Kim did rely on some KWP elites prior to 2008, including his sister Kim Kyong Hui, but KWP elites were generally not as close as military elites to the regime's center of power. For example, all the personnel sitting on the NDC in 2003 were connected to the military. After Kim's stroke, however, several KWP officials became members of the NDC.[90] Our theory states that when preparing for succession, Kim should have integrated elites from outside his inner circle into the ruling coalition to build a power base for Kim Jong Un. Based on the identification of party elites as generally being outside of Kim's inner circle prior to August 2008, we hypothesize that:

> —Hypothesis 1 (H1): Party elites were more likely to attend a leadership event when Kim Jong Il was preparing for leadership succession compared to when he was not.

Our theory also contains an implication for how Kim Jong Il should have managed military elites after his stroke. We posit that incumbents, when preparing for succession, do not purge elites in their inner circle if the incumbent is visibly weakened, generally due to ill health or old age. Kim was visibly weakened by his stroke in August 2008. He therefore should not have overtly attempted to undermine the status of military elites, who we identified as the key elites in his inner circle when he started preparing for succession. Our second hypothesis is therefore:

> —Hypothesis 2 (H2): Military elites were neither more nor less likely to attend a leadership event when Kim Jong Il was preparing for leadership succession compared to when he was not.

Unit of Analysis and Dependent Variable

We test the hypotheses by examining the likelihoods of different types of elites being invited to a leadership event before and during Kim Jong

[87] Gause 2011, 119.

[88] Jeon 2009, 197; Kwon 2003, 293–94; Wintrobe 2013.

[89] To be clear, all elites in our data set are KWP members. But a qualitative difference exists between, for instance, being a KWP member and the minister of the Armed Forces versus being a KWP member and a party secretary. The former is a military elite; the latter is a party elite.

[90] Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014, 783–84.

Il's preparations for succession; in other words, before and after Kim's stroke. The unit of analysis is elite event.[91] We identify elites as the 161 elites who attended at least two leadership events out of a possible 1,573 events in the Kim Jong Il era between July 1994 and November 2011. An additional 69 officials were invited to one leadership event but attending one event does not denote significance. A relatively unimportant provincial official could be invited to an event if Kim visited their area; repeat attendance suggests a notable level of importance.[92] We drop elites from the analysis once we are confident that they have died either naturally or at the hands of the state, or if they defected, in the case of Hwang Jang Yop. At this point, zero possibility exists of that elite being invited to an event.[93] In contrast, elites who are purged without being executed remain in the analysis since they could still be invited to events in the future. For example, Jang Song Thaek is believed to have been sentenced to hard labor in 2004 but returned to leadership events in January 2006. Biographical data on North Korean elites come from databases managed by NK Pro, South Korea's Ministry of Unification (MOU), and Yonhap News Agency (hereafter, Yonhap).[94]

The dependent variable is *attend*, which equals one if an elite attended a leadership event, and zero otherwise. Aside from Kim Jong Il who attended every event, the senior military official Hyon Chol Hae attended the most events (568/1,573), while the 161 elites in the data set attended an average of 50 events each.

Figure 1 depicts temporal variations in leadership events under Kim Jong Il. Events generally increased throughout Kim's tenure, but significantly increased after 2008, when he suffered his stroke. The number of military leadership events slightly decreased after 2008 but did not change significantly. However, the number of nonmilitary events notably increased. Although our hypotheses concern the identities of which elites Kim invited to events rather than which types of events were held, these patterns suggest that something changed after Kim's stroke, and this modification was seemingly underpinned by Kim's shift in attitude toward civilian versus military activities within the regime.[95]

[91] We prefer elite-event, rather than event, since it allows us to account for individual-level factors. An event-level analysis produces consistent findings; see Appendix G in the supplementary material.

[92] Findings are robust to the sample containing elites who attended at least one event.

[93] All elites identified for inclusion are in the data set from July 1994. The inclusion of young elites who were less likely to attend events at earlier points in time does not affect the results.

[94] NK Pro is available at https://www.nknews.org/pro/; MOU at https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/theme/peopleList.do; and Yonhap at https://www.yna.co.kr/nk/person/index.

[95] NK Pro classifies events as military or nonmilitary (arts/culture, diplomatic, economic, other, or political).

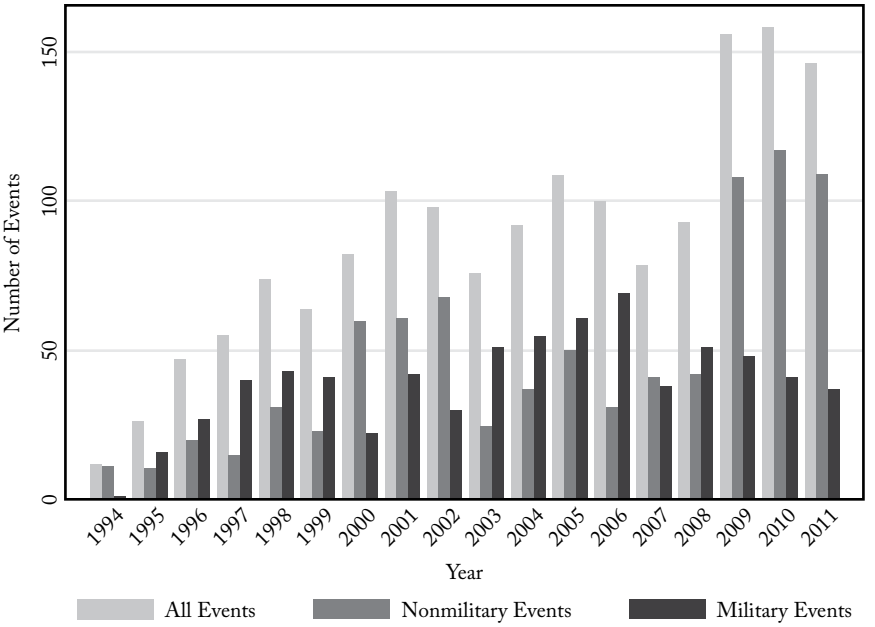

Figure 1
Leadership Events under Kim Jong Il

Independent Variables

We are interested in the likelihood of different types of elites attending an event before and during Kim's preparations for succession, identified by the periods before and after Kim's stroke, respectively. Our first independent variable is therefore *stroke,* which equals one for all events after Kim's stroke between October 6, 2008, and November 30, 2011, and zero for all events between July 12, 1994, and August 15, 2008. Kim's stroke and recovery account for the lack of events between August 15 and October 6, 2008.

We interact *stroke* with our other main independent variable: a binary indicator of the primary role that an elite has at a given point in time. This variable is categorical and signifies whether an elite's primary role is in the cabinet, military, or party.[96] North Korean elites can simultaneously hold several titles across different institutions, but they have a primary role based on their main day-to-day responsibilities. For instance, Kim Jong Il's brother-in-law, Jang Song Thaek, held the rank

[96] We do not identify elites whose primary role is in the cabinet as in or outside of Kim's inner circle. Their responsibilities relate to the administration of the civilian state. They are members of the KWP, as all elites are, but their primary roles are neither military nor party.

of general in the KPA between 2010 and 2013, but his primary role was in the KWP; he became the first vice director of the party's Organization and Guidance Department in 1995, and he was the Party Administration Department director between 2007 and 2013.[97] We examined data from MOU, NK Pro, and Yonhap to identify the primary roles that elites had at a given point in time.[98] Most elites have the same type of primary role throughout Kim's tenure, but our data also capture temporal variation when an elite's primary role changed.[99] Our data make a significant contribution; they provide important biographical information on the professional careers of hundreds of North Korean elites. North Korea's opacity means that our classifications may contain mistakes. However, the variable represents the most granular classification of North Korean elites' roles to date from the most authoritative publicly available Korean and western sources.[100]

We also include several control variables. First, North Korea's ruling coalition is male dominated. We account for whether an elite is *female*, since we expect that male elites are more likely to be invited to leadership events. One-hundred and fifty-six of the 161 elites who attended at least two events under Kim Jong Il are male. We also control for an elite's *age*, measured in years. Older elites are more likely to disappear because they retire or fall ill and are no longer able to attend events. We identify a birth year for 144 elites.[101] Data on elites' gender and age come from MOU and Yonhap. Finally, we account for time dependence by including a count of the number of *months* that Kim had been in office, as well as its squared and cubic terms.[102]

Estimation

Given the binary dependent variable, we estimate a series of logistic regression models based on the following specification:

[97] Appendix B in the supplementary material describes, with examples, how we identified elites' primary roles as the cabinet, military, or party.

[98] In our sample of 161 elites who attended at least two events during the Kim Jong Il era, 47.61 percent of elite-event observations are party elites, 25.87 percent are military elites, 25.80 percent are cabinet elites, and 0.73 percent are missing.

[99] Twenty-five elites' primary roles are always in the cabinet, thirty-five in the military, sixty-two in the party, and thirty-eight contain temporal variation; we could not identify one elite's primary role.

[100] We build on significant data contributions in prior work. T. Kim 2021 identifies whether 367 North Korean elites between 1948 and 2019 were in the KWP Politburo, and whether an elite built their career outside the KWP, government, and KPA. Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014 track membership of the secretariat, the National Defense Commission, and the Politburo between 1994 and 2013. Ishiyama 2014 categorizes thirty North Korean elites between 1997 and 2011 based on their political orientation as conservative, open, or moderate.

[101] We lack days and months for most elites' birthdays, so each elite becomes a year older on January 1.

[102] Carter and Signorino 2010. Summary statistics are in Appendix C in the supplementary material.

$$ln\left(\frac{P_{it}}{1-P_{it}}\right) = \alpha + \zeta Stroke_t + \mu PrimaryRole_{it} + \delta(Stroke_t \times PrimaryRole_{it}) + \mathbf{X}\beta_{it} + \eta_i, \quad (1)$$

where P_{it} denotes the probability of elite i attending an event at time t, $X\beta_{it}$ is the vector of control variables described above, and η_i is the error term clustered by elites and assumed to be independent and identically distributed.

IV. Quantitative Evidence

Main Results

We first examine the hypotheses descriptively. Table 1 shows differences in the means of the proportion of events that elites attended before and after Kim's stroke. Consistent with our theory, Table 1 shows that KWP elites attended 2.77 percent of events on average before Kim's stroke, and 7.19 percent after. This change is significant at the 99 percent confidence level. The differences for cabinet and military officials are smaller and not statistically significant.

We next examine whether these findings are robust to accounting for alternative explanations. We estimate three logistic regression models based on Equation 1. In each model, we interact *cabinet*, *military*, or *party* with *stroke*; include one of the others in $X\beta_{it}$ as a control variable; and omit the other variable as the reference category. The full results are in Table D1 in the supplementary material. The results match our expectations, but the inclusion of the interaction term means that hypothesis testing is best conducted by examining the models' substantive effects.[103] We run 1,000 simulations and draw predicted values from a

Table 1
Differences in Means for the Proportion of Events Attended by Different Types of Elites

	Cabinet	*Military*	*Party*
Prestroke	1.48	6.59	2.77
Poststroke	2.77	5.61	7.19
Difference in means	1.30	−0.97	4.42*

* $p < 0.01$

[103] Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006.

multivariate normal distribution based on the models in Table D1.[104] Figure 2 summarizes the results of these simulations.

Figure 2 shows that party elites were 70.58 percent more likely to attend a leadership event after Kim's stroke than they were before his stroke. The right side of Figure 2 shows that this change in the predicted probability of a party elite attending an event before and after Kim's stroke is statistically significant at 95 percent confidence. On the other hand, the changes in the probabilities of cabinet and military elites attending an event after Kim's stroke are notably smaller. Cabinet officials were only 12.89 percent more likely to attend an event after Kim's stroke, while military officials were 29.14 percent less likely to do so. Further, neither of these changes are statistically significant.

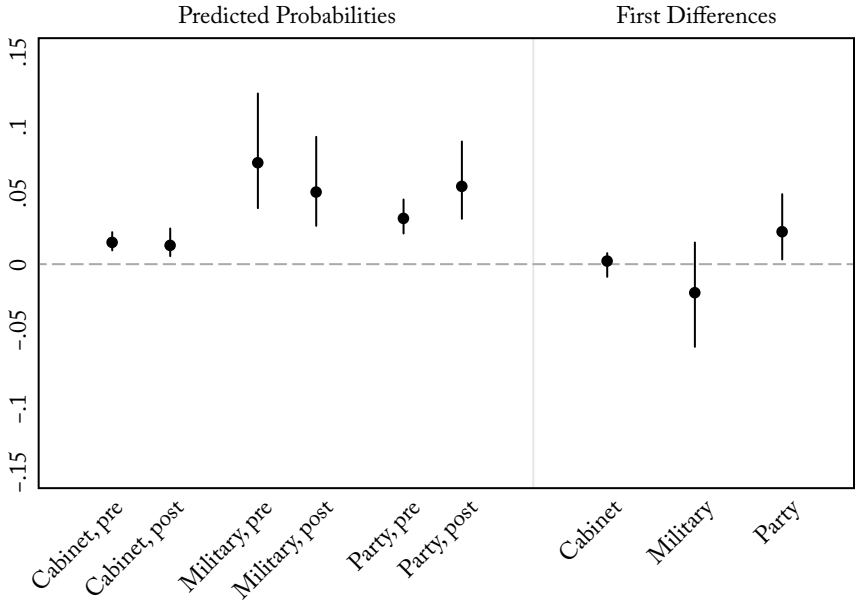

Figure 2
Predicted Probabilities and First Differences for the Likelihood of Different Types of Elites Attending Leadership Events[a]

[a] Figure shows the predicted probabilities of different types of elites attending leadership events before and after Kim Jong Il's stroke in August 2008 (left side) and the first differences of these predicted probabilities (right side). Bars show 95 percent confidence intervals. Pre and post in figure refer to prestroke and poststroke.

[104] King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000.

Placebo and Robustness Tests

We conduct several placebo tests to check if the models are uncovering a false positive for KWP elites. First, we check that the results are not driven by whether Kim Jong Il was consolidating or had a firm grip on power.[105] The results for KWP elites could be due to the possibility that once Kim had consolidated power, he could more easily alter the composition of his ruling coalition. Jennifer Gandhi and Jane Sumner's estimates of autocrats' levels of consolidation suggest that Kim reached the pinnacle of his consolidation in 2004.[106] We therefore reestimate the main models (Table D1) with *stroke* replaced by *consolidation*, which equals one for all events from January 1, 2004. We find that party elites were no more likely to attend a leadership event once Kim had consolidated power than they were before. No changes occurred in the attendance patterns of cabinet and military elites. These results are summarized by the circles in Figure 3.[107]

Second, we identify the exogenous shock as North Korea's first nuclear test (October 9, 2006). Our results could be spurious due to the possibility that once Kim had provided the military with nuclear weapons, he did not need to pay as much attention to military elites so he could instead prioritize KWP officials at events to cultivate loyalty in the party.[108] The crosses in Figure 3 show that although Kim invited cabinet and military elites to events less often after the first nuclear test, KWP elites were not invited more often after the first nuclear test than they were before (full results in Table F1 in the supplementary material). The temporal proximity of the first nuclear test to Kim's stroke suggests that Kim's management of KWP elites changed because he was preparing for succession (H1). The results of this placebo test are also consistent with the idea that Kim made a concerted effort to not diminish the status of military elites when he was preparing for succession (H2).

We also check that the results are robust to several plausible confounding explanations. We first examine whether the findings hold when accounting for time-invariant elite-idiosyncratic factors. Second, we check that the findings are unaffected by excluding elites who attended only one event. Third, we account for elites' past attendance by controlling for whether an elite attended the previous event. Fourth, we drop elites from the analysis who are one standard deviation younger than the youngest

[105] Svolik 2012, 55.

[106] Gandhi and Sumner 2020. Appendix E in the supplementary material displays Kim's consolidation over time.

[107] The full results are in Table F1.

[108] Habib 2011, 58.

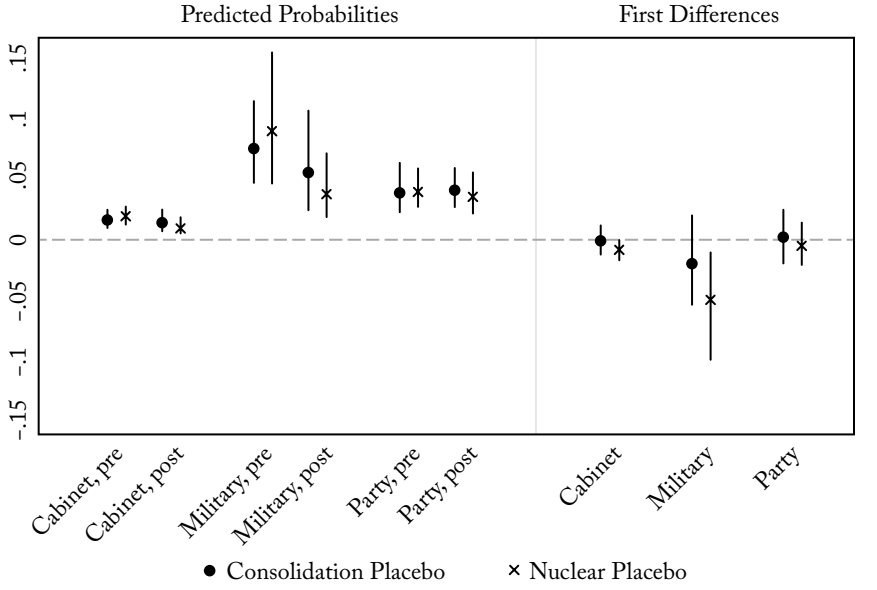

FIGURE 3
PLACEBO TESTS[a]

[a] Figure shows the predicted probabilities of different types of elites attending leadership events before and after Kim Jong Il consolidated power in 2004 (left side; circles), before and after North Korea's first nuclear test on October 9, 2006 (left side; crosses), and the first differences of these predicted probabilities (right side). Bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

elite to attend an event, aside from Kim Jong Un; elites are probably less likely to be invited to an event early in their careers. Fifth, we check that our sample size does not falsely inflate signs of statistical significance by restructuring the data set so that the unit of analysis is event and examine how the total number of different kinds of elites changed after Kim's stroke. Finally, we implement a strict regression discontinuity in time design based on Kim's stroke as the cutoff. The results from these tests provide further evidence that Kim invited party elites more often to events after his stroke because he was preparing for succession (see Appendix G in the supplementary material).

V. PROBING THE ARGUMENT'S LOGIC

Elites who were outside Kim Jong Il's inner circle before his stroke—KWP elites—became more prominent once Kim started preparing for succession. We argue that this was to build a power base for Kim Jong Un

to help the younger Kim stabilize the regime once in power. We now probe whether evidence exists consistent with our argument's logic, or whether the finding reflects several plausible alternative explanations.

We consider an additional implication of the argument to assess the veracity of the argument's logic. Specifically, we assess whether KWP elites who became more prominent after the stroke played important roles in helping Kim Jong Un govern in his early years, and compare their roles to KWP elites who did not become more prominent under Kim Jong Il after his stroke.[109] Kim Jong Il coordinated succession plans with family members prior to his death,[110] so if Kim brought KWP elites into his inner circle to build a power base for Kim Jong Un, we should expect Kim Jong Un to have governed, at least initially, by leaning on these elites for support. Finding evidence that these KWP elites helped Kim Jong Un to stabilize the regime in his early years would affirm our argument's plausibility.[111] We would doubt our argument's logic if, prior to his stroke, Kim Jong Il purged many of these elites, they retired during his tenure, or they played unimportant roles under Kim Jong Un.

We analyze this implication by tracking the careers of thirty KWP elites who were statistically significantly more likely to attend an event after Kim's stroke, as well as the careers of the forty-one KWP elites who were not more likely to attend an event after Kim's stroke. We focus on elites' careers between Kim Jong Il's death in December 2011 and Kim Jong Un's execution of his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, in December 2013. North Korea watchers believe that Jang's execution signaled that Kim Jong Un had a secure grip on power.[112] Thus, if Kim needed support from an elite power base to stabilize the regime and govern effectively, it would have been prior to this event. In tracking these elites' careers, we are especially interested in whether they helped Kim Jong Un to harness the state's coercive and propaganda apparatuses to maintain control over the people, and if they could help to ensure that incumbent-era elites did not obstruct the new leader.[113] In other words, we are interested in whether these elites helped Kim Jong Un to command

[109] Ideally, we would analyze whether Kim Jong Il's motivations for increasingly inviting KWP elites to events after his stroke were consistent with our argument's logic. However, this is impossible without access to Kim's diary—if such a thing exists—or documents from Kim's personal office—his personal secretariat.

[110] Gause 2015, 54.

[111] Collier 2011, 825.

[112] Gause 2015.

[113] Gerschewski 2013, 21–22.

the infrastructural power of the state.[114] In practice, doing so means identifying whether these elites helped Kim Jong Un to monitor other elites, control the KPA, and oversee propaganda and domestic-facing security apparatuses.

Table 2 summarizes the primary roles that KWP elites, who were raised in prominence by Kim Jong Il after his stroke, held in Kim Jong Un's early years. The majority of these elites played important roles in helping Kim Jong Un to govern between 2011 and 2013. They carried out key tasks to help Kim Jong Un monitor elites, control the army, and subdue the people. To monitor other elites, Kim Kyong Ok was the first vice director of the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) from 2008, a position he continued to hold in Kim Jong Un's early years. The OGD manages KWP human resource issues, including appointments, promotions, and disciplinary procedures. To quell potential threats from elites more broadly, Choe Ryong Hae and O Kuk Ryol helped to provide civilian control of the army, through their respective roles as chief of the KPA's General Political Bureau and vice chair of the NDC. Several elites also played key roles in the development of Kim Jong Un's personality cult, notably, Kim Ki Nam as party secretariat agitprop secretary. In terms of helping Kim to govern and wield the power of the state, one task is notably absent among these elites; no one in the left column of Table 2 was involved in the Ministry of Public Security, essentially North Korea's police.[115] However, Kim Chang Sop was the Political Bureau director of the Ministry of State Security from 2009, which is North Korea's secret police and tasked with operating its concentration camps. Thus, between Kim Chang Sop, Kim Ki Nam, and Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong Un had supportive allies who could provide control over the people. Overall, elites who were raised in prominence by Kim Jong Il, which we argued was to help Kim Jong Un stabilize the regime, played important roles in helping Kim Jong Un gain control over the infrastructural power of the state.

Comparison with the careers in Kim Jong Un's early years of KWP elites who were not raised up in prominence by Kim Jong Il emphasizes that those who were raised up played important roles in helping Kim Jong Un to govern. Table 3 shows that only a few of these other KWP elites held significant roles under Kim Jong Un. Ri Thae Chol held the important position of first vice director of the Ministry of Public Security, Kang Tong Yun held a significant role in the OGD, while several

[114] Mann 1984, 189.
[115] Gause 2015, 266.

of these KWP elites moved to notable posts within the military. However, these were exceptions. The largest portion of KWP elites who were not raised up in prominence by Kim Jong Il played comparatively minor roles in Kim Jong Un's early years. Many held regional positions in provinces away from Pyongyang, others' primary roles were members of bodies

TABLE 2
CAREERS OF KWP ELITES WHO KIM JONG IL RAISED IN PROMINENCE AFTER HIS STROKE, DECEMBER 2011–DECEMBER 2013[a]

Played Important Role in Kim Jong Un's Inner Circle	*Purged or Retired under Kim Jong Il*
1. Choe Ryong Hae *KPA General Political Bureau Chief, April 2012–April 2014*	1. Choe Ik Gyu *KWP Agitprop Department Director, March 2009 until September 2010 disappearance*
2. Choe Thae Bok *KWP Secretary for Education, 1993–2016*	2. Hong Sok Hyong *KWP Planning & Finance Department Director, September 2010 until June 2011 disappearance*
3. Han Kwang Sang *KPA Finance Department First Vice Director, 2010–2013*	3. Pak Nam Gi *KWP Planning & Finance Department Director, 2005 until March 2010 execution*
4. Kim Chang Sop *Ministry of State Security Political Bureau Director, 2009–2015*	4. Pyon Yong Rip *Science & Technology General League Central Committee Chair from 2003 until 2010 removal*
5. Kim Ki Nam *KWP Secretariat Agitprop Secretary, 1992–2017*	5. Ri Je Gang *Organization & Guidance Department First Vice Director, 2001 until suspicious death in June 2010*
6. Kim Kyong Hui *KWP Light Industry Department Director, 1987–2012*	6. U Tong Chuk *Ministry of State Security First Vice Director, 2009 until late 2011 disappearance*
7. Kim Kyong Ok *Organization and Guidance First Vice Director, 2008–2019*	
8. Kim Phyong Hae *KWP Cadre Department Director, 2010–2016*	
9. Kim Rak Hui *KWP Vice Premier 2010–2012*	
10. Kim Yang Gon *KWP United Front Department, 2007–2015*	*Natural Exit*
11. Jang Song Thaek *KWP Administration Department Director, 2007–2013*	1. Pak Jong Sun *Organization & Guidance First Vice Director from 2010 until early 2011; death from lung cancer*
12. Ju Kyu Chang *KWP Machine Industry Department Director, 2010–2016*	2. Ri Chol Bong *KWP Kangwon Provincial Committee Chief Secretary from 2006 until late 2009; death from car crash*

Table 2 *cont.*

Played Important Role in Kim Jong Un's Inner Circle (cont.)	*Played Less Important Role in Kim Jong Un's Inner Circle*
13. Mun Kyong Dok *KWP Pyongyang Chief Secretary, 2010–2014*	1. Hong In Bom *KWP South Pyongan Chief Secretary, 2010–2014*
14. O Kuk Ryol *National Defense Commission Vice Chair, 2009–2014*	2. Ju Yong Sik *KWP Chagang Chief Secretary, 2010–2012*
15. Pak To Chun *KWP Secretariat Secretary, 2010–2015*	3. Ri Man Gon *KWP North Pyongan Province Committee Chief Secretary, 2010–2015*
16. Ri Jae Il *KWP Agitprop Department First Vice Director, 2004–2020*	
17. Ri Ryong Ha *KWP Administration Department First Vice Director, date unknown–2013*	
18. Thae Jong Su *KWP General Services Department Director, September 2010–May 2012*	

[a] We omit Ju Sang Song and Ri Pyong Sam because we cannot confidently identify their positions.

that sound important but contain hundreds of members (the KWP Central Committee or the Supreme People's Assembly), while several held relatively insignificant roles (for example, Choe Chil Nam as the Journalists' Union central committee chair, Pak Kyong Son as North Korea-Laos Friend Association chair, and Kim Yong Dae as the Korean Social Democratic Party central committee chair).

The continued prominence of certain KWP elites under Kim Jong Un may, however, reflect alternative explanations. One alternative logic for the rise and enduring prominence of KWP elites between August 2008 and December 2013 is that Kim Jong Il wanted to focus on policies that KWP elites could help with before his death,[116] and then there was relative stasis in elite turnover while Kim Jong Un found his feet early in his tenure. However, this explanation is difficult to reconcile with two pieces of evidence. First, KWP elites were not only more likely to attend events in general after Kim Jong Il's stroke, but they were also more likely to attend military events specifically.[117] The argument that Kim

[116] Cheong Seong-chang, director of the Center for Korean Peninsula Strategy at the Sejong Institute, suggested this possibility.

[117] See Figure H1 in the supplementary material.

Table 3
Careers of KWP Elites Who Kim Jong Il Did Not Raise in Prominence after His Stroke, December 2011–December 2013[a]

Played Important Role in Kim Jong Un's Inner Circle	*Purged or Retired under Kim Jong Il*
1. Hwang Pyong So *Organization and Guidance Department Vice Director, 2005–2014*	1. Han Song Ryong *Removed from KWP Secretariat and Central Committee, September 2010*
2. Jon Pyong Ho *Cabinet Political Bureau Chief and Chief Secretary, September 2010–March 2012*	2. Jong Ha Chol *Former KWP Agitation and Propaganda Department chair, purged in 2005*
3. Kim Sung Yon *KWP Department Director, date unknown*	3. Kim Hyon Ju *Removed as Rason Party Chief Secretary, January 2010*
4. Kang Tong Yun *Organization and Guidance Department Vice Director, January 2007–date unknown*	4. Kim Si Hak *Removed from Central Committee, September 2010*
5. Ri Ha Il *KPA Vice Marshal, date unknown*	5. Kim Tong Un *Removed as KWP Office 39 Director, February 2010*
6. Ri Thae Chol *Ministry of Public Security First Vice Director and Supreme Commander of Korean People's Internal Forces, May 2010–date unknown*	6. Ri Kun Mo *Removed from Central Committee, September 2010*
7. Ri Yong Mu *National Defense Commission Vice Chair, 1998–2016*	7. Ri Tuk Nam *Removed as Kanggye City Party Secretary, December 2009*
Played Less Important Role in Kim Jong Un's Inner Circle	*Natural Exit*
1. Choe Chil Nam *Journalists' Union Central Committee Chair, October 2008–April 2013*	1. Hong Song Nam *Died in March 2009*
2. Ho Jong Man *Chongryon Central Committee Chair, May 2010–present*	2. Jang Song U *Died in August 2009*
3. Jang Yong Sok *KWP Ryanggang Hyesan Chief Secretary, 2006–2019*	3. Jo Chang Dok *Died in 2013*
4. Ji Jae Ryong *Ambassador to China, September 2010–2021*	4. Kim Ik Hyon *Died in January 2009*
5. Ju Hak Sim *Samsu County Party Chief Secretary, 2006–date unknown*	5. Kim Jung Rin *Died in April 2010*
	6. Kim Yong Sam *Died in June 2009*
	7. Pak Song Chol *Died in October 2008*

Table 3 *cont.*

Played Less Important Role in Kim Jong Un's Inner Circle (cont.)	*Natural Exit (cont.)*
6. Kim Chol Man *Central Committee full member, September 2010–2018* 7. Kim Kyong Ho *Chair of Korea Taekwondo Committee, June 2011–2021* 8. Kim Kuk Thae *KWP Control Commission Head, 2010–2013* 9. Kim Pyong Sik *Phihyon County Party Committee Chief Secretary, date unknown* 10. Kim Un Gi *South Hwanghwe Party Chief Secretary, 1995–date unknown* 11. Kim Yong Dae *Korean Social Democratic Party Central Committee Chair, 1998–2019* 12. Pak Kyong Son *North Korea-Laos Friend Association Chair, March 2010–date unknown, and Ambassador to India, April 2013–July 2014* 13. Pak Sun Hui *Supreme People's Assembly member, 2009–2014* 14. Rim Kyong Man *Rason Municipal Party Chief Secretary, January 2010–2011, and Party Central Committee Member, 2010–present* 15. Ryu Mi Yong *Chondo Young Friends Party Central Committee Chair, 1993–2016*	8. Ri Yong Chol *Died in April 2010* 9. Ryo Won *Died in July 2009* 10. So Man Sul *Died in February 2012*

[a] We omit Pak Jung Gun and Pak Min Gyun because we cannot confidently identify their positions.

Jong Il increasingly invited KWP elites to events after his stroke, because he wanted to focus on policies with which KWP elites could help, does not explain the increasingly likely attendance of KWP elites at military events after Kim's stroke. Second, Kim Jong Un purged a high-profile military elite—Ri Yong Ho—in July 2012.[118] Purging civilian elites is generally

[118] Gause 2015, 28.

easier than purging military elites; thus, if Kim Jong Un was willing to purge military elites, he was unlikely to keep around party elites, whose prominence had increased after Kim Jong Il's stroke, only because he was less sure of his position in his early days.

A second alternative logic for KWP elites becoming more prominent between 2008 and 2013 is that Kim Jong Il was guarding against a military coup when he was visibly vulnerable between August 2008 and December 2011.[119] However, we have several reasons to doubt this explanation. First, Kim Jong Il did not invite party elites more frequently after his stroke to expand the size of the ruling coalition to enhance the visibility of a formal institution—in this case, the KWP—to signal strong support.[120] The findings are robust to accounting for the number of elites invited to an event.[121] Second, the type of elites more frequently invited did not increase coordination costs for would-be-conspirators.[122] Inviting KWP elites to events more frequently would not affect coordination costs since military elites could plot at other locations away from the prying eyes of KWP officials. Existing coup-proofing measures also already make a coup attempt unlikely. The military has a split chain of command, which inhibits large troop movements without consent coming from multiple sources. Leadership of the defense of Pyongyang and the leader's bodyguard are also both run separately and distinctly from the regular military chain of command.[123] The embedding of political officers and security command officers (from North Korea's internal military secret police) within the military also makes a coup attempt unlikely.[124] Kim purged some civilian elites after his stroke—notably the finance minister, Park Nam Gi—but he did little reshuffling of military personnel or military elite purges, both of which we would expect if Kim had been coup-proofing.[125] Overall, the evidence is consistent with our argument's logic, and reasons exist to doubt the plausible alternative explanations for the quantitative findings.

VI. Conclusion

We argue that incumbents prepare for succession by building a power base for their preferred successor to help the latter stabilize the regime once in power. Incumbents populate this power base with elites from

[119] Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2017.
[120] Timoneda 2020.
[121] See Figure H2 in the supplementary material.
[122] De Bruin 2020, 20–22; Matthews 2022, 667.
[123] Ko 2007, 123; Oh 2012, 129–30.
[124] Choi 1997, 47–53; Tertitskiy 2022.
[125] Park 2011.

outside their inner circle to negate the sovereign's dilemma, in which having a coherent elite could help the successor to govern but it could threaten the successor's survival. Because the fortunes of elites from outside the incumbent's inner circle are tied to the succession, they should support the successor.

A case study of Kim Jong Il's management of elites ahead of the succession to Kim Jong Un supports this argument. The research design relies on the assumption that Kim Jong Il's stroke motivated him to start preparing for succession—an assumption that is supported by accounts from journalists and scholars. Through a quantitative analysis of leadership events in North Korea, supplemented with original biographical data on hundreds of elites, we show that Kim raised the prominence of party elites, but not cabinet or military elites, when he was preparing for succession. Qualitative evidence of party elites' careers under Kim Jong Un is consistent with the argument's logic.

Our analysis features some limitations, however. Chiefly, North Korea's opacity restricts what data we can access. By observing leadership events, we risk falling foul to Thomas Pepinsky's concern that scholars "miss the true politics of authoritarianism by focusing on readily observable" data.[126] North Korea's closed-off nature especially impacts our analysis of the argument's logic; a lack of high-level defectors who could provide insights into Kim Jong Il's mindset means that we are cautious in how confident we can be about why Kim elevated party elites after his stroke. A second potential limitation is whether the findings apply elsewhere. North Korea is often thought of as idiosyncratic. For this reason, it has rarely been integrated into research on comparative authoritarianism.

However, the argument can be generalized to other contexts, specifically to regimes with personalistic leaders who can more easily manipulate the composition of their ruling coalition. Beyond this scope condition, the argument applies to other regimes irrespective of their ideology, institutional makeup, or whether the succession is hereditary. For example, in Cuba's party regime, Miguel Díaz-Canel's assumption of the vice presidency in 2013 and thereby becoming heir apparent was accompanied by the appointments of various middle-aged technocrats to the politburo.[127] These officials, who have played crucial roles in helping Díaz-Canel govern, were outside of Raúl Castro's inner circle, which mainly featured older party elites and military officials.[128] In monarchical Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman's position as the crown prince

[126] Pepinsky 2014, 650.
[127] Bye 2019, 344; Bye 2020, 212–13; LeoGrande 2016.
[128] Bye 2019, 386–87.

has been accompanied by the increasing prominence of younger princes and nonroyals, who have received important positions in the government and as provincial governors. For example, King Salman appointed Fahd bin Mohammed al-Essa to head the royal court in August 2019, an important gatekeeping position. Al-Essa is a known bin Salman ally, having been the head of bin Salman's office at the Defense Ministry.[129] Finally, in Hosni Mubarak's military regime in Egypt, although the succession was disrupted by the Arab Spring, Mubarak prepared for succession to his son, Gamal, by placing allies for Gamal in key positions, including in the cabinet.[130] In these cases, the elevation of elites outside of the incumbent's inner circle was intended to provide a power base to help the successor govern.

The article contains several implications for comparative research on authoritarianism. First, the evidence presented here that autocrats behave differently when preparing for succession suggests that, more broadly, an autocrat's actions vary based on the leader's time horizon. Second, leader health is a crucial variable, sometimes a critical juncture, that should be integrated into theoretical and empirical models of authoritarianism.[131] Third, our argument offers an alternative perspective to previous research, which emphasizes the role of party institutionalization in facilitating succession.[132] Instead, our findings suggest that in a personalistic regime, stability surrounding succession can be enabled by using the party as a dugout, from which prospective loyalists can be trained to step up at the necessary time.

The findings point to several promising avenues for future research. First, the start of a leader's tenure can also be a vulnerable time for the leader.[133] Examining how dictators manage elites within regimes during this period would provide further insights into the micropolitics of authoritarian survival and build on cross-national analyses.[134] Second, research should explore the relationship between elite management and authoritarian survival. We argue that Kim Jong Il integrated outsiders to ensure Kim Jong Un's succession; this claim does not however mean that this strategy necessarily caused the Kim regime's sur-

[129] Stenslie 2020, 360–61.
[130] Brownlee 2007b, 46–47; Zahid 2010, 220–21.
[131] Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2017.
[132] Opalo and Smith 2021.
[133] Svolik 2012, 76–77.
[134] Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, chap. 4; Sudduth 2017.

vival. Collection of additional elite-level data across dictatorships can facilitate testing this relationship alongside alternative explanations of how dictators pull off a peaceful succession.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article can be found at http://muse.jhu.edu/resolve/246.

Data

Replication files for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LUBKUD.

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