Explaining Support for Undemocratic Leaders in Democracies in the Middle East

Original and Replicated Findings
Mark Tessler and Amaney Jamal completed the first wave of the Arab Barometer in 2007 and published initial findings from the survey the following year (Jamal and Tessler, 2009). Tessler and Jamal completed the first wave of the Arab Barometer in 2007 and published initial findings from the survey the following year (Jamal and Tessler, 2009). With results from Jordan, Palestine, Algeria, Morocco, and Kuwait.

They found that 86% agree that despite its problems, democracy is better than any other form of government.

But 12% of those who support democracy believe that having a strong, non-democratic leader that does not bother with parliament and elections is good.

Why? They had two theories: personal religiosity and political evaluations.

Perhaps Islam made people inherently want an autocratic leader. Or perhaps discontent with existing political institutions soured their perceptions of democratic executive leadership.

Their logit model had little predictive power, but it did show that personal religiosity has no significant effect on support for a non-democratic leader, while political evaluations do have a significant effect — those who feel democracies are not good at maintaining order are more likely to prefer an autocratic leader.

More Appropriate Models Lead to Better Results
Collapsing survey categories — converting from “very good”, “good”, “bad”, and “very bad” to just “bad” and “good” — is common practice, but eliminates substantial nuance from the model and hides important insights and results.

Ordered logistic regression can show patterns within the different categories and levels of the data and yield better insights.

Regardless of how religious they are, the average person will consider a strong non-democratic leader very bad about 50% of the time, bad 40%, good 8%, and very good 2%.

An average person who feels that democracies are not good at maintaining order is more than twice as likely to feel that a strong non-democratic leader is good (16% vs. 5%). Additionally, the intensity of opposition to autocracy reverses as political evaluations improve.

Education and Political Evaluations
Political evaluations have even more of an effect when combined with education. Those who think democracies are not good at maintaining order and have no education are still likely to think autocratic leaders are bad, but have the same probability of thinking they are either good or very bad.

On the other hand, those with higher education are overwhelmingly likely to think autocratic leaders are bad or very bad regardless of their political evaluations.

Gradual Change and Social Capital
Political evaluations partially explain why people might support democracy and a strong non-democratic leader. But there are additional potential hypotheses.

Perhaps people want democratic change to happen quickly, shepherded by a strong leader.

Or maybe societies with less social capital or trust prefer having a strong leader.

Those who prefer gradual reform are the most opposed to a non-democratic leader.

In the extreme, those with low education, no trust, and poor political evaluations, think an autocratic leader is good 50% of the time, but very bad, good, and very good are all equiprobable.

Conclusion
Significant independent variables do not fully explain why people support autocratic rulers in a democracy, but they do explain changes in magnitude of opinion when using a more appropriate model.