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Author/s:

Goldring, E;Ward, P

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Elite Management Before Autocratic Leader Succession: Evidence from North Korea

Edward Goldring¹ Peter Ward²

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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. We argue that incumbents prepare for succession by building a power base, of elites outside their inner circle, for their preferred successor; this helps the successor stabilize the regime. We test the 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.

¹ Lecturer, University of York, edward.goldring@york.ac.uk, ORCID: 0000-0002-7457-6809.

² Senior Researcher, Kookmin University, pward89@kookmin.ac.kr, ORCID: 0000-0002-7281-1756; corresponding author.

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“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 계승해나갈 령도자로 내세운것은 우리 당과 인민의 더 없는 행운이고 자랑이며 영광 입니다. 김정은동지를 잘 받들어 나가는 여기에 모든 승리의 결정적 담보가 있습니다.”

— Kim Jong Il, 2011¹

I Introduction

Political scientists have long been interested in autocratic leader succession, initially suggesting it destabilizes autocracies.² However, many regimes have recently conducted peaceful leadership transitions. 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 deliver succession.⁴

We build on this research by asking: how do dictators manage elites to prepare for succession? This 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

¹ J. I. Kim 2015, 425; *Juche* refers to “being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one’s own country;” Lee 2002, 105.

² Herz 1952, 20–21; Huntington 1965, 396; Olson 1993, 571–72.

³ Succession entails a leadership change where 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.

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 were 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 were 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 the argument 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 entitled "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 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

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

⁶ Cha 2011.

⁷ Ishiyama and Kim 2020, 166.

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 dataset on elites' appearances at leadership events. These are public events attended by Kim Jong Il and usually one or more elites within the regime.⁸ Dictators like 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 dataset 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. This includes 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

⁸ 'Public' means events are recorded by North Korean state media, not that anyone can attend.

⁹ The samples of elites are similar in the pre- and post-stroke periods except for elites who died, or in the case of one, defected; see Section III.

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 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 comprised of party elites to help Kim Jong Un stabilize the regime. There are 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 on how dictators avoid falling to irregular types of exits, especially at the hands of insider elites,¹¹ but also from the people,¹² and foreign states.¹³ Yet, succession is an extremely 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

¹⁰ Marcum and Brown 2016.

¹¹ De Bruin 2020.

¹² Chin, Song, and Wright 2022.

¹³ Grauvogel and Soest 2014.

¹⁴ There were 153 successions 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 is a notable comparison because coups are the most common irregular way that dictators leave office; Svobik 2012, 5.

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

¹⁶ Meng 2020, 206.

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 help 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 nor how this helped ensure a peaceful transition.¹⁸ We provide an explanation of *how* Kim Jong Il used KWP elites to ensure Kim Jong Un's position after the former's death. Then, regarding integrating North Korea within comparative authoritarianism, 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, 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.

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."

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

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 Two non-monarchical regimes to explore how incumbents solve the thorny issue of succession. For example, examining 42 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 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

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.

²⁴ Lachapelle et al. 2020, 35.

²⁵ Wain 2009, 307.

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 when he takes power, so that he can 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 being weak can also precipitate agitation from actors outside the regime – i.e., 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 him deter, or at least overcome, challenges within and outside the regime.

There are many tactics 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

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 Kim 2021.

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 post-succession environment.

It is a well-known aphorism that no dictator governs alone.³⁰ Dictators require a power base of trusted elites who can help them nullify threats within the regime, control the people, and 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 like counterbalancing incumbent-era elites or the military once the successor is in power;³⁵ although it helps the successor avoid falling to a coup it does not do this via

²⁹ Skidmore 1988, chaps. 6–7.

³⁰ Svolik 2012, 79.

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 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.

traditional means of coup-proofing.³⁶ Rather, a power base helps the successor 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 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, this entails the earlier empowerment of elites 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 develop expertise. In Egypt, for example, before he was assassinated, Anwar Sadat prepared for succession to Hosni Mubarak. Key elites were empowered to establish a support base for Mubarak. This included Abu Ghazala, who gained valuable experience at dealing with the US 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, 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

³⁶ Quinlivan 1999.

³⁷ Gerschewski 2013, 21–22.

³⁸ Springborg 1987, 6

³⁹ Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022, 221.

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 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, then they are vulnerable to being 'captured,' where elites force their preferences on the successor, or they may even be overthrown by these elites. 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

Incumbents therefore alleviate the 'sovereign's dilemma' by building a power base for their

⁴⁰ Wang 2022, 13

⁴¹ Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell 2022, 114; Meng 2020, 209.

⁴² Lee 1980, 70.

⁴³ Kim and Larson 1988, 87. Meng 2021, 962–63 similarly discusses Felix Houphouët-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, Houphouët-Boigny's prime minister.

preferred successor from elites who are outside their inner circle. These elites are not nobodies; 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 of 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; it does not matter that it was the incumbent rather than the successor who orchestrated their increasing prominence 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 they have had little chance to develop strong vertical relationships with junior officials or strong horizontal relationships

⁴⁴ Ra 2019, 121–26.

⁴⁵ Relatedly, see Shih 2022, 11–12.

⁴⁶ Wang 2022.

⁴⁷ Weeks 2008, 41.

with fellow elites who might support them in a power grab.⁴⁸ Elites are unlikely to challenge the successor if they believe there is a 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 wield the 'infrastructural power' of the state while not threatening the successor's personal survival,⁵⁰ thereby circumventing the 'sovereign's dilemma'.⁵¹

This strategy is not without risks. First, empowering a successor who need not be the incumbent's son could trigger the 'crown-prince' problem, where the successor has the "motive and opportunity to mount a coup."⁵² Second, increasing the size of the ruling coalition—a side effect of building a power base for the incumbent, while not necessarily purging incumbent-era elites (see below)—could be dangerous since it decreases the value of membership of the ruling coalition; this 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, there are logical reasons that explain why these possible costs are outweighed by the benefits of this strategy. Taking these points in turn, empowering a successor *could*

⁴⁸ Goldring and Matthews 2023.

⁴⁹ Finer 1962.

⁵⁰ Mann 1984.

⁵¹ Wang 2022.

⁵² Kokkonen and Sundell 2014, 440; Herz 1952, 30.

⁵³ Bueno De Mesquita et al. 2003.

⁵⁴ Svolik 2012, 59.

⁵⁵ Roessler 2011.

trigger the ‘crown-prince’ problem, but this is unlikely for the same reason that certain institutional approaches tend not to. 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 non-institutional 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 brings us to the related point 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 intra-regime balance of power. This, 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 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

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.

⁵⁸ Svoblik 2012, 55–60.

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

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.

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 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—i.e., 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 large amounts of discounted fuel and other aid.⁶⁸ This 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

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.

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 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, and 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

⁷⁰Appendix A 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.

⁷¹For 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.

⁷²Gause 2011, chap. 6.

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

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 the Central Military Commission, National Defense Commission, and the Politburo. This helped extend Kim Jong Un's influence over the country's then-primary institutions.⁷⁶

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 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.

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.

⁷⁷ Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014; Ishiyama 2014; Mahdavi and Ishiyama 2020.

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 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 provide greater insights than this, in ways that 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 infers greater involvement in a policy priority of the leader. By inviting certain elites to events, the leader can not just signal but actively increase an elite's relative power. Similarly, by frequently disinviting an elite, a

⁷⁸ Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014; Mahdavi and Ishiyama 2020.

⁷⁹ Svolik 2012.

⁸⁰ Kim and Lee 2012; Lee 2002.

dictator demonstrates the elite's relative lack of importance to his or her fellow elites, or that the elite is being purged.⁸¹ We later 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 where even for those within the regime identifying power is difficult, the perception of power becomes power.⁸³

There are other ways to identify members of North Korea's ruling coalition, including using the membership of prominent institutions like the Central Committee,⁸⁴ but there are limitations 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

⁸¹ For example, former Premier Park Pong Ju attended 29 events in 2005, 6 in 2006, and was relieved from his positions in 2007.

⁸² Herspring 1987.

⁸³ Schedler and Hoffmann 2016, 97.

⁸⁴ 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.

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. Joseph Wright's research on the structures of autocratic rule show 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 was given an ideological basis with the 'Military First' (*Songun*, 선군) ideology. *Songun* meant that the National Defense Commission's power outstripped its purview in the North's 1998 revised constitution, and it became "the de facto general administration."⁸⁷ This 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 more 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 National Defense Commission in 2003 were connected to the military. After Kim's stroke, however, several KWP officials became members.⁹⁰ Our theory states that when preparing for succession, Kim should have integrated

⁸⁶ Wright 2021.

⁸⁷ Gause 2011, 119.

⁸⁸ Jeon 2009, 197; Kwon 2003, 293-94; Wintrobe 2013.

⁸⁹ To be clear, all elites in our dataset are KWP members. But there is a distinction 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 would be a military elite, but the latter would be a party elite.

⁹⁰ Haggard, Herman, and Ryu 2014, 783-84.

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:

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 posited that incumbents 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, when preparing for succession. Kim was visibly weakened by his stroke in August 2008. He therefore should not have attempted to overtly 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:

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 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

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).

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, there is zero possibility 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 future. For example, Jang Song Thaek was 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 dataset attended an average of 50 events each.

Figure 1 visualizes 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 non-military events notably increased. Although our hypotheses concern the identities of which elites Kim invited to events rather

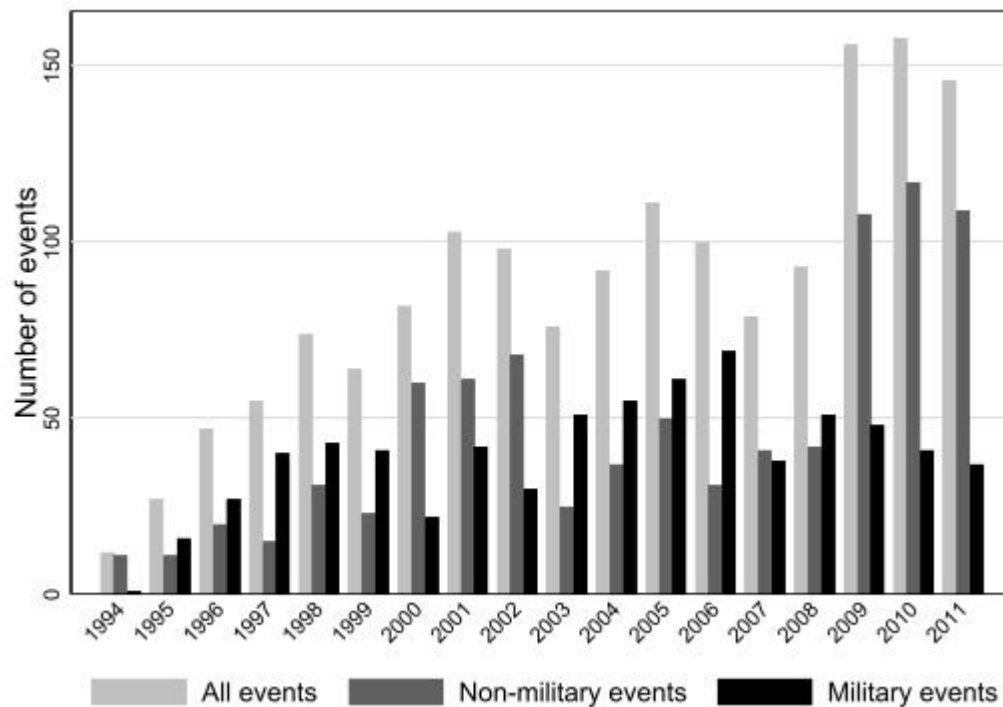
⁹² Findings are robust to the sample containing elites who attended at least one event.

⁹³ All elites identified for inclusion are in the dataset 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](https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/theme/peopleList.do;); *Yonhap* at <https://www.yna.co.kr/nk/person/index>.

than which types of events were held, these patterns suggest that something changed after Kim's stroke, and this was seemingly underpinned by Kim's differing attitude towards civilian and military activities within the regime.⁹⁵

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

⁹⁵ *NK Pro* classifies events as military or non-military (arts/culture, diplomatic, economic, other, or political).

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 is a categorical variable that 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 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 a 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 have 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 This is a significant data contribution; it provides important biographical information on the professional careers of hundreds of North Korean elites. North Korea's opacity means it is possible that our classifications 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

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.

⁹⁷ Appendix B 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 25 elites' primary roles are always in the cabinet, 35 in the military, 62 in the party, and 38 contain temporal variation; we could not identify one elite's primary role.

¹⁰⁰ We build on significant data contributions in prior work. Kim 2021 identifies whether 367 North Korean elites

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. 156 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 has 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:

(1)

$$\ln\left(\frac{P_{it}}{1 - P_{it}}\right) = \alpha + \zeta\text{Stroke}_t + \mu\text{PrimaryRole}_{it} + \delta(\text{Stroke}_t \times \text{PrimaryRole}_{it}) + \mathbf{X}\beta_{it} + \eta_i$$

where P_{it} denotes the probability of elite i attending an event at time t , $\mathbf{X}\beta_{it}$ 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.

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 30 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.

IV Quantitative Evidence

Main Results

We first examine the hypotheses descriptively. Table 1 shows differences in the means of the proportion of events that different 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.

Table 1: Differences in means for the proportion of events attended by different types of elites

	Cabinet	Military	Party
Pre-stroke	1.48	6.59	2.77
Post-stroke	2.77	5.61	7.19
Difference in means	1.30	-0.97	4.42*

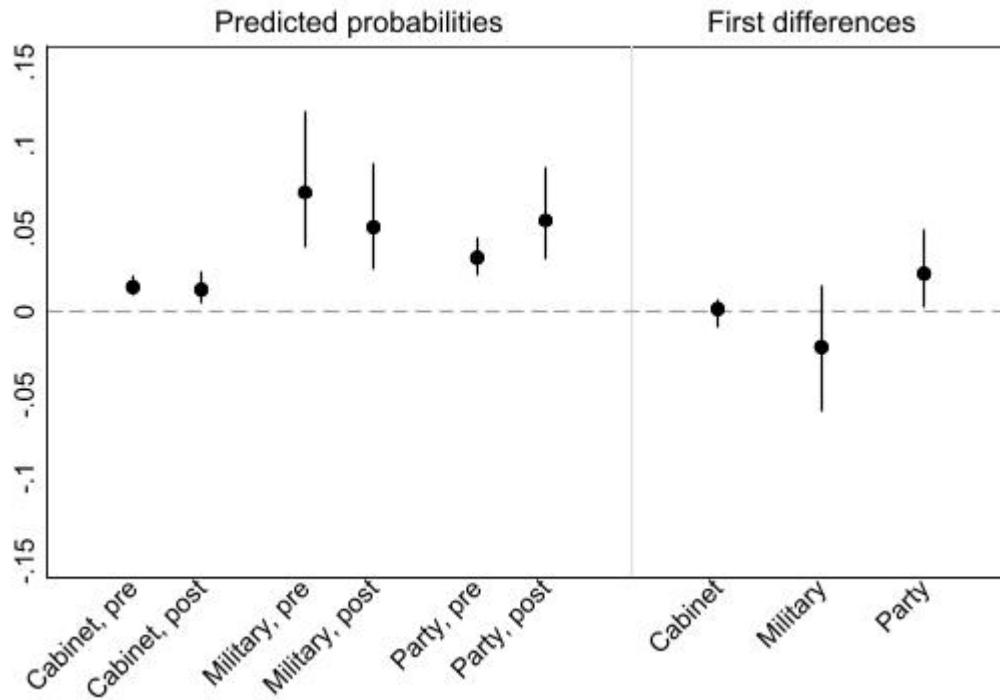
Notes: * $p < 0.01$

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 one of *Cabinet*, *Military*, and *Party* with *Stroke*, include one of the others in $\mathbf{X}\beta_{it}$ as a control variable, and omit the other variable as the reference category. The full results are in Table D1. 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 multivariate normal distribution

¹⁰³ Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006.

based on the models in Table D1.¹⁰⁴ Figure 2 summarizes the results of these simulations.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities and first differences for the likelihood of different types of elites attending leadership events



Notes: 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.

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. The right-hand 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

¹⁰⁴ King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000.

stroke while military officials were 29.14 percent less likely to do so. Further, neither of these changes are statistically significant.

Placebo and Robustness Tests

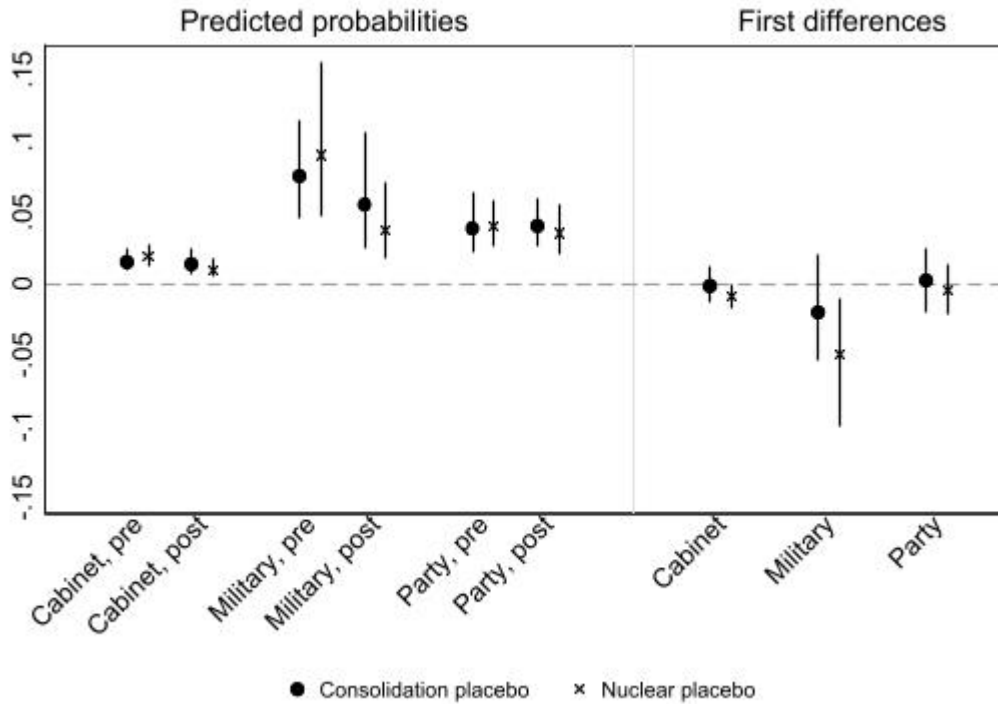
We conduct several placebo tests to check if the models are uncovering a false positive for KWP elites. First, we check that the results are not driven by whether Kim Jong Il was consolidating or had a firm grip on power.¹⁰⁵ The results for KWP elites could be due to the possibility that once Kim had consolidated power, he could more easily alter the composition of his ruling coalition. Gandhi and Sumner's estimates of autocrats' levels of consolidation suggest that Kim reached the pinnacle of his consolidation in 2004.¹⁰⁶ We therefore re-estimate 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. There were also no changes in the attendance patterns of cabinet and military elites. These results are summarized by the circles in Figure 3.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Svolik 2012, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Gandhi and Sumner 2020. Appendix E displays Kim's consolidation over time.

¹⁰⁷ The full results are in Table F1.

Figure 3: Placebo tests



Notes: 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.

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). 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

¹⁰⁸ Habib 2011, 58.

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 just 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 elite to attend an event, aside from Kim Jong Un; elites are probably less likely to be invited to an event earlier in their careers. Fifth, we check that our sample size does not falsely inflate signs of statistical significance by restructuring the dataset so that the unit of analysis is event and examine how the total numbers 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).

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 argued 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 there is evidence 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 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 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 30 KWP elites who were statistically significantly more likely to attend an event after Kim's stroke, as well as the careers of the 41 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. In tracking these elites' careers, we are especially interested in whether they helped Kim

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.

Jong Un harness the state's coercive and propaganda apparatuses to maintain control over the people, and if they could help 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 command the 'infrastructural power' of the state.¹¹⁴ In practice, this means identifying whether these elites helped Kim Jong Un 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 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 provide civilian control of the army, through their respective roles as Chief of the KPA's General Political Bureau and Vice Chair of the National Defense Commission. 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 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

¹¹³ Gerschewski 2013, 21–22.

¹¹⁴ Mann 1984, 189.

¹¹⁵ Gause 2015, 266.

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.

Table 2: Careers of KWP elites who were raised in prominence by Kim Jong Il after his stroke, December 2011-December 2013

<i>Played important role in Kim Jong Un's inner circle</i>	<i>Purged or retired under Kim Jong Il</i>
1. Choe Ryong Hae <i>KPA General Political Bureau Chief, April 2012-April 2014</i>	1. Choe Ik Gyu <i>KWP Agitprop Department Director, March 2009 until September 2010 disappearance</i>
2. Choe Thae Bok <i>KWP Secretary for Education, 1993-2016</i>	2. Hong Sok Hyong <i>KWP Planning & Finance Department Director, September 2010 until June 2011 disappearance</i>
3. Han Kwang Sang <i>KPA Finance Department First Vice Director, 2010-2013</i>	3. Pak Nam Gi <i>KWP Planning & Finance Department Director, 2005 until March 2010 execution</i>
4. Kim Chang Sop <i>Ministry of State Security Political Bureau Director, 2009-2015</i>	4. Pyon Yong Rip <i>Science & Technology General League Central Committee Chair from 2003 until 2010 removal</i>
5. Kim Ki Nam <i>KWP Secretariat Agitprop Secretary, 1992-2017</i>	5. Ri Je Gang <i>Organization & Guidance Department First Vice Director, 2001 until suspicious death in June 2010</i>
6. Kim Kyong Hui <i>KWP Light Industry Department Director, 1987-2012</i>	6. U Tong Chuk <i>Ministry of State Security First Vice Director, 2009 until late 2011 disappearance</i>
7. Kim Kyong Ok <i>Organization and Guidance First Vice Director, 2008-2019</i>	
8. Kim Phyong Hae <i>KWP Cadre Department Director, 2010-2016</i>	
9. Kim Rak Hui <i>KWP Vice Premier 2010-2012</i>	
10. Kim Yang Gon <i>KWP United Front Department, 2007-2015</i>	
11. Jang Song Thaek <i>KWP Administration Department Director, 2007-2013</i>	
12. Ju Kyu Chang <i>KWP Machine Industry Department Director, 2010-2016</i>	
13. Mun Kyong Dok <i>KWP Pyongyang Chief Secretary, 2010-2014</i>	
14. O Kuk Ryol <i>National Defense Commission Vice Chair, 2009-2014</i>	
15. Pak To Chun <i>KWP Secretariat Secretary, 2010-2015</i>	
16. Ri Jae Il <i>KWP Agitprop Department First Vice Director, 2004-2020</i>	
17. Ri Ryong Ha <i>KWP Administration Department First Vice Director, date unknown-2013</i>	
18. Thae Jong Su <i>KWP General Services Department Director, Sept 2010-May 2012</i>	
<i>Played less important role in Kim Jong Un's inner circle</i>	<i>Natural exit</i>
1. Hong In Bom <i>KWP South Pyongan Chief Secretary, 2010-2014</i>	1. Pak Jong Sun <i>Organization & Guidance First Vice Director from 2010 until early 2011 death from lung cancer</i>
2. Ju Yong Sik <i>KWP Chagang Chief Secretary, 2010-2012</i>	3. Ri Chol Bong <i>KWP Kangwon Provincial Committee Chief Secretary from 2006 until late 2009 car crash death</i>
3. Ri Man Gon <i>KWP North Pyongan Province Committee Chief Secretary, 2010-2015</i>	

Notes: We omit Ju Sang Song and Ri Pyong Sam because we cannot confidently identify their positions.

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 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 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 that sound important but contain hundreds of members (the KWP Central Committee or the Supreme People's Assembly), while several held relatively insignificant roles (e.g., 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).

Table 3: Careers of KWP elites who were not raised in prominence by Kim Jong Il after his stroke, December 2011-December 2013

<i>Played important role in Kim Jong Un's inner circle</i>	<i>Purged or retired under Kim Jong Il</i>
1. Hwang Pyong So <i>Organization and Guidance Department Vice Director, 2005-2014</i>	1. Han Song Ryong <i>Removed from KWP Secretariat and Central Committee, September 2010</i>
2. Jon Pyong Ho <i>Cabinet Political Bureau Chief and Chief Secretary, September 2010-March 2012</i>	2. Jong Ha Chol <i>Former KWP Agitation and Propaganda Department chair, purged in 2005</i>
3. Kim Sung Yon <i>KWP Department Director, date unknown</i>	3. Kim Hyon Ju <i>Removed as Rason Party Chief Secretary, Jan 2010</i>
4. Kang Tong Yun <i>Organization and Guidance Department Vice Director, January 2007-date unknown</i>	4. Kim Si Hak <i>Removed from Central Committee, September 2010</i>
5. Ri Ha Il <i>KPA Vice Marshal, date unknown</i>	5. Kim Tong Un <i>Removed as KWP Office 39 Director, February 2010</i>
6. Ri Thae Chol <i>Ministry of Public Security First Vice Director and Supreme Commander of Korean People's Internal Forces, May 2010-date unknown</i>	6. Ri Kun Mo <i>Removed from Central Committee, September 2010</i>
7. Ri Yong Mu <i>National Defense Commission Vice Chair, 1998-2016</i>	7. Ri Tuk Nam <i>Removed as Kanggye City Party Secretary, December 2009</i>
<i>Played less important role in Kim Jong Un's inner circle</i>	<i>Natural exit</i>
1. Choe Chil Nam <i>Journalists' Union Central Committee Chair, October 2008-April 2013</i>	1. Hong Song Nam <i>Died in March 2009</i>
2. Ho Jong Man <i>Chongryon Central Committee Chair, May 2010-present</i>	2. Jang Song U <i>Died in August 2009</i>
3. Jang Yong Sok <i>KWP Ryanggang Hyesan Chief Secretary, 2006-2019</i>	3. Jo Chang Dok <i>Died in 2013</i>
4. Ji Jae Ryong <i>Ambassador to China, September 2010-2021</i>	4. Kim Ik Hyon <i>Died in January 2009</i>
5. Ju Hak Sim <i>Samsu County Party Chief Secretary, 2006-date unknown</i>	5. Kim Jung Rin <i>Died in April 2010</i>
6. Kim Chol Man <i>Central Committee full member, September 2010-2018</i>	6. Kim Yong Sam <i>Died in June 2009</i>
7. Kim Kyong Ho <i>Chair of Korea Taekwondo Committee, June 2011-2021</i>	7. Pak Song Chol <i>Died in October 2008</i>
8. Kim Kuk Thae <i>KWP Control Commission Head, 2010-2013</i>	8. Ri Yong Chol <i>Died in April 2010</i>
9. Kim Pyong Sik <i>Phihyon County Party Committee Chief Secretary, date unknown</i>	9. Ryo Won <i>Died in July 2009</i>
10. Kim Un Gi <i>South Hwanghwe Party Chief Secretary, 1995-date unknown</i>	10. So Man Sul <i>Died in February 2012</i>
11. Kim Yong Dae <i>Korean Social Democratic Party Central Committee Chair, 1998-2019</i>	
12. Pak Kyong Son <i>North Korea-Laos Friend Association Chair, March 2010-date unknown, and Ambassador to India, April 2013-July 2014</i>	

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

Notes: We omit Pak Jung Gun and Pak Min Gyun because we cannot identify confidently their positions.

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 just more likely to attend events in general after Kim Jong Il's stroke, but they were also more likely to attend military events specifically (see Figure H1). The argument that Kim Jong Il increasingly invited KWP elites to events after his stroke because he wanted to focus on policies that KWP elites could help with 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 2012.¹¹⁷ It is generally easier to purge civilian than military elites; thus, if Kim Jong Un was willing to purge military elites then it is unlikely that Kim Jong Un kept 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

¹¹⁶ Cheong Seong-chang, Director of the Center for North Korean Studies at the Sejong Institute, suggested this possibility.

¹¹⁷ Gause 2015, 28.

2013 is that Kim Jong Il was guarding against a military coup when he was visibly vulnerable between August 2008 and December 2011.¹¹⁸ However, there are 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.¹¹⁹ The findings are robust to accounting for the number of elites invited to an event (see Figure H2). Second, the type of elites more frequently invited did not increase coordination costs for would-be-conspirators.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ 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.¹²² Kim purged some civilian elites after his stroke—notably the finance minister Park Nam Gi—but there was little reshuffling of military personnel or military elite purges, both of which we would expect if Kim had been coup-proofing.¹²³

Overall, there is evidence consistent with our argument’s logic, and there are reasons to

¹¹⁸ Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2017.

¹¹⁹ Timoneda 2020.

¹²⁰ De Bruin 2020, 20–22; Matthews 2022, 667.

¹²¹ Ko 2007, 123; Oh 2012, 129–30.

¹²² Choi 1997, 47–53; Tertitskiy 2022.

¹²³ Park 2011.

doubt the plausible alternative explanations for the quantitative findings.

VI Conclusion

We argued 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 outside their inner circle to negate the 'sovereign's dilemma,' where having a coherent elite could help the successor govern but it could threaten the successor's survival. The fortunes of elites from outside the incumbent's inner circle are tied to the succession so 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 the argument. The research design relied 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 showed 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. Chiefly, North Korea's opacity restricts what data we can access. By observing leadership events we risk falling foul of Thomas Pepinsky's concern that scholars 'miss the true politics of authoritarianism by focusing on readily observable' data.¹²⁴ North Korea's closed-off nature especially impacts our analysis of the

¹²⁴ Pepinsky 2014, 650.

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.¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶ In monarchical Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman's position as the crown prince has been accompanied by the increasing prominence of younger princes and non-royals, 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.¹²⁷ 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

¹²⁵ Bye 2019, 344; Bye 2020, 212–13; LeoGrande 2016.

¹²⁶ Bye 2019, 386–87.

¹²⁷ Stenslie 2020, 360–61.

in key positions, including in the cabinet.¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹ Third, our argument offers an alternative perspective to previous research, which emphasizes the role of party institutionalization in facilitating succession.¹³⁰ 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 and 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.¹³¹ Examining how dictators manage elites within regimes during this period would provide further insights into the micro-politics of authoritarian survival, building on cross-national analyses.¹³² Second, the relationship between elite management and authoritarian survival should be explored. We argued that Kim Jong II integrated outsiders to try to ensure Kim Jong Un's succession; this does not however mean that this strategy necessarily caused the Kim regime's survival. Collection of additional elite-level data across dictatorships can facilitate testing of this relationship alongside alternative explanations of how dictators pull off a peaceful succession.

¹²⁸ Brownlee 2007b, 46–47; Zahid 2010, 220–21.

¹²⁹ Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2017.

¹³⁰ Opalo and Smith 2021.

¹³¹ Svolik 2012, 76–77.

¹³² Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, chap. 4; Sudduth 2017.

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A Evidence of exogenous shock

Table A1 illustrates the consensus among experts on North Korea that Kim Jong Il's stroke in August 2008 sparked him into planning for succession when he had not done so previously.

Table A1: Illustrative evidence of the exogenous shock that Kim Jong Il's stroke sparked leadership succession planning

Author	Evidence
Snyder ¹	"Kim Jong-il grasped the urgency of his health situation and was strengthening institutional arrangements to stabilize a political transition."
Gause ²	"Kim's stroke in August seemed to have had a jarring impact on the North Korean leadership. It raised the real possibility of a near-term succession, which could come with very little warning."
Lim ³	"The North began preparing the second hereditary succession in earnest after Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke in August 2008."
Lankov ⁴	"Kim Jong Il finally made up his mind in late 2008, soon after he suffered a serious health problem – apparently, a stroke."
Fifield ⁵	"The succession preparations took on a new sense of urgency in the summer of 2008, with Kim Jong Il's stroke."
Shin ⁶	"After his stroke in the summer of 2008, Kim Jong-il had to select his own successor quickly."

¹ Scott Snyder, "Kim Jong-Il's Successor Dilemmas," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903418678>.

² Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Chong-Il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 122.

³ Jae-Cheon Lim, "North Korea's Hereditary Succession Comparing Two Key Transitions in the DPRK," *Asian Survey* 52, no. 3 (January 6, 2012): 558, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.3.550>.

⁴ Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55.

⁵ Anna Fifield, *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2019), 67.

⁶ David W. Shin, *Kim Jong-Un's Strategy for Survival: A Method to Madness* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 49.

B Coding of elites

In Appendix B, we describe how we code an elite's primary role as being in the cabinet, military, or party at a given point in time.

Cabinet

The cabinet is shorthand for the non-Korean Workers' Party civilian state. This includes:

- Most ministries and organizations under ministries, including factories, rural committees.
 - Exceptions are the Ministries of State and People's Security.
- Regional People's Committee personnel.
- Supreme People's Assembly-related positions.

Military

The military is shorthand for the Korean People's Army.

- Korean People's Army officers are coded as primarily affiliated with the military, except for:
 - Elites responsible for a paramilitary organization, such as the Ministry of Public Security, whose command lies outside of the Korean People's Army.
 - Elites with a(n honorary) military rank but responsible for a civilian administrative post such as a Korean Workers' Party department.

Party

The party is shorthand for the Korean Workers' Party. This includes elites with:

- Jobs in the party. For instance, a KWP Secretary within a government ministry is considered a party position, rather than a cabinet position, in accordance with the principle of party pre-eminence under North Korean law.
- Party administrative jobs. For example, a vice director of the Organization and Guidance Department is a party position, whereas being a member of the Central Committee confers no direct party-related powers on an individual.
- Roles in the Ministries of State and Public Security.
- Responsibilities covering party 'transmission belts' such as the unions (industry, agriculture, media, or the arts), women's league, youth league, minor parties in the Supreme People Assembly's popular front (e.g., the Social Democratic Party), and overseas organizations like the General Association of Koreans in Japan.

Table B1 provides examples of how we code elites as having a primary role in the cabinet, party, military, or their primary role varying over time.

Table B1: Example coding of elites

강능수 Kang Nung Su	Summary of positions
	From 1989, member of the 4.15 Culture Creation Group.
	Between 1999 and 2003, Minister of Culture.
	In 2000, Kang became the Korean Public Information Commission Chair.
	Between 2006 and 2010, Minister of Culture again.
	In 2010, the best estimate is February, Kang became the Party's Film Department Director.
	Kang was the Vice Premier from 2010 to 2014.
김격식 Kim Kyok Sik	Coding
	July 1994 - August 1999: Party elite
	September 1999 - January 2010: Cabinet elite
	February 2010 - end: Party elite
김경호 Kim Kyong Ho	Summary of positions
	From 1994, KPA Second Corps Commander.
	Coding
	Military elite.
김영일 Kim Yong Il	Summary of positions
	Chief Secretary, Ryanggang Provincial Committee of the KWP.
	Coding
	Party elite.
	Summary of positions
	1994 to 2007, Minister of Land and Marine Transport.
	2007 to 2010, Premier.
	Coding
	Cabinet elite.

C Summary statistics

Table C1 contains the summary statistics for all 230 elites, i.e. elites are included even if they only attended one event.

Table C1: Summary statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Mode
Attend	0	1	0	0.03	0
Cabinet	0	1	0	0.27	0
Military	0	1	0	0.29	0
Party	0	1	0	0.45	0
Stroke	0	1	0	0.27	0
Female	0	1	0	0.06	0
Age	10	106	67	66.81	
Month	1	209	126	121.93	
Consolidation	0	1	1	0.56	1
Nuclear	0	1	0	0.37	0

D Main results

Table D1: Main results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Cabinet	-0.93*** (0.26)	-1.06*** (0.29)	-1.54*** (0.37)
Military	0.46 (0.34)	0.78* (0.38)	
Party			-0.81* (0.39)
Stroke	0.18 (0.21)	0.45* (0.22)	-0.34 (0.27)
Cabinet×Stroke	-0.38 (0.34)		
Military×Stroke		-0.83* (0.38)	
Party×Stroke			0.88* (0.36)
Female	0.09 (0.73)	0.07 (0.74)	0.07 (0.74)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Month	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)
Constant	-2.85*** (0.64)	-2.99*** (0.65)	-2.25*** (0.65)
Pseudo R^2	0.05	0.06	0.06
N	190,349	190,349	190,349

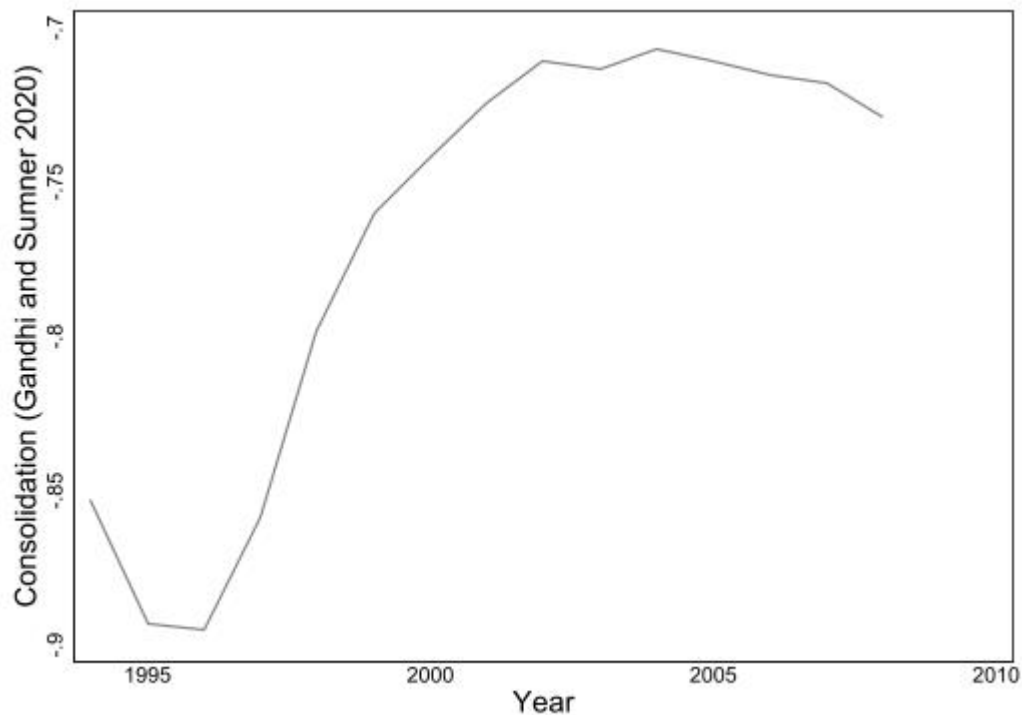
Notes: Month² and Month³ included but not shown.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

E Kim Jong Il's consolidation

Figure E1 shows Kim Jong Il's consolidation between 1994 and 2008 based on Gandhi and Sumner's data.⁷ We are unable to track Kim's consolidation to the end of his tenure as their dataset ends in 2008.

Figure E1: Kim Jong Il's consolidation



⁷ Jennifer Gandhi and Jane Lawrence Sumner, "Measuring the Consolidation of Power in Nondemocracies," *The Journal of Politics* 82, no. 4 (February 25, 2020): 1545–58, <https://doi.org/10.1086/708683>.

F Placebo tests

Table F1: Results from placebo tests

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Cabinet	-1.05*** (0.28)	-1.06*** (0.29)	-1.53*** (0.37)	-0.95*** (0.27)	-1.06*** (0.29)	-1.54*** (0.37)
Military	0.44 (0.35)	0.71 (0.38)		0.46 (0.35)	0.78* (0.39)	
Party			-0.71 (0.39)			-0.81* (0.39)
Consolidation	-0.11 (0.23)	0.04 (0.30)	-0.34 (0.29)			
Cabinet×Consolidation	-0.04 (0.37)					
Military×Consolidation		-0.43 (0.35)				
Party×Consolidation			0.41 (0.34)			
Nuclear				-0.46* (0.23)	-0.23 (0.24)	-0.88** (0.30)
Cabinet×Nuclear				-0.27 (0.35)		
Military×Nuclear					-0.69 (0.38)	
Party×Nuclear						0.73* (0.36)
Female	0.09 (0.73)	0.08 (0.73)	0.08 (0.73)	0.09 (0.73)	0.07 (0.74)	0.07 (0.74)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Month	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)
Constant	-2.80*** (0.66)	-2.91*** (0.66)	-2.23*** (0.65)	-2.74*** (0.64)	-2.87*** (0.65)	-2.13** (0.65)
Pseudo R ²	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06
N	190,349	190,349	190,349	190,349	190,349	190,349

Notes: *Month*² and *Month*³ included but not shown.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

G Robustness tests

G.1 Elite idiosyncratic factors

We re-estimate the main models in Table D1 but also account for idiosyncratic elite characteristics by including elite fixed effects. The results from this analysis are shown in Table G1; the size and significance of the coefficients are similar to the main results in Table D1.

Table G1: Accounting for elite fixed effects

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Cabinet	-1.09** (0.40)	-1.01** (0.35)	-1.89** (0.72)
Military	0.51 (0.63)	1.05 (0.69)	
Party			-1.17 (0.72)
Stroke	0.15 (0.22)	0.52* (0.26)	-0.54 (0.32)
Cabinet×Stroke	-0.36 (0.37)		
Military×Stroke		-1.12* (0.48)	
Party×Stroke			1.17* (0.45)
Female	1.08 (1.28)	1.37 (1.28)	1.06 (1.27)
Age	-0.13 (0.07)	-0.13 (0.07)	-0.13 (0.07)
Month	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	4.19 (3.73)	3.86 (3.69)	5.24 (3.83)
Elite fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Pseudo R^2	0.26	0.26	0.26
N	190,349	190,349	190,349

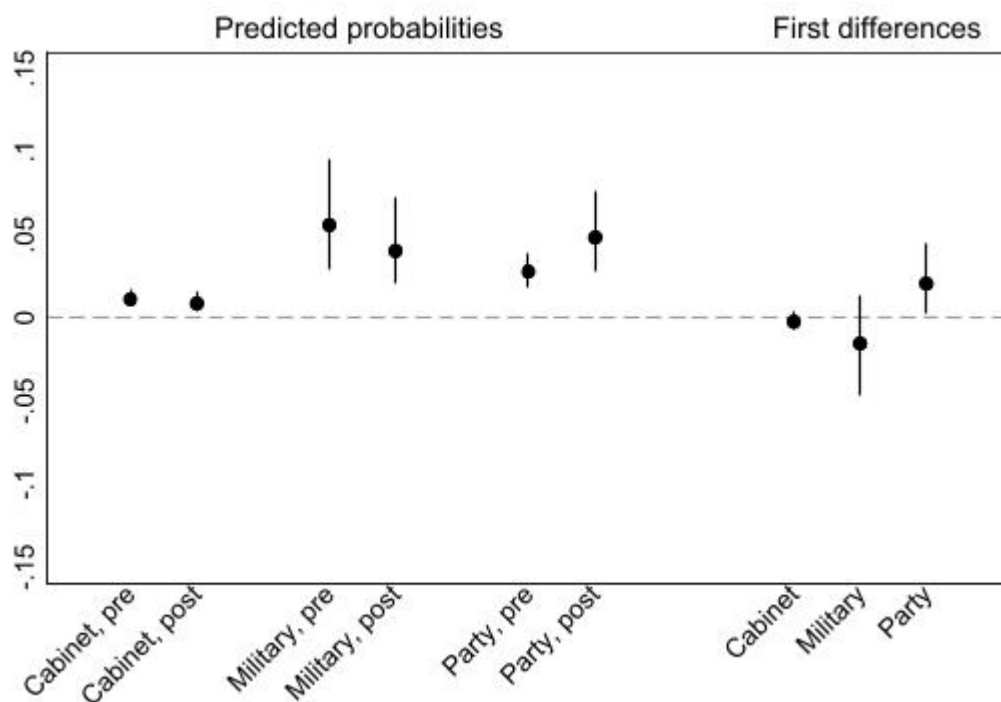
Notes: $Month^2$ and $Month^3$ included but not shown.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

G.2 Including elites who attended just one event

We re-estimate the main models in Table D1 but also include elites who attended just one event. The substantive results from this analysis are visualized in Figure G1. The findings are similar to the main results.

Figure G1: Including elites who attended just one event: Predicted probabilities and first differences for the likelihood of different types of elites attending leadership events

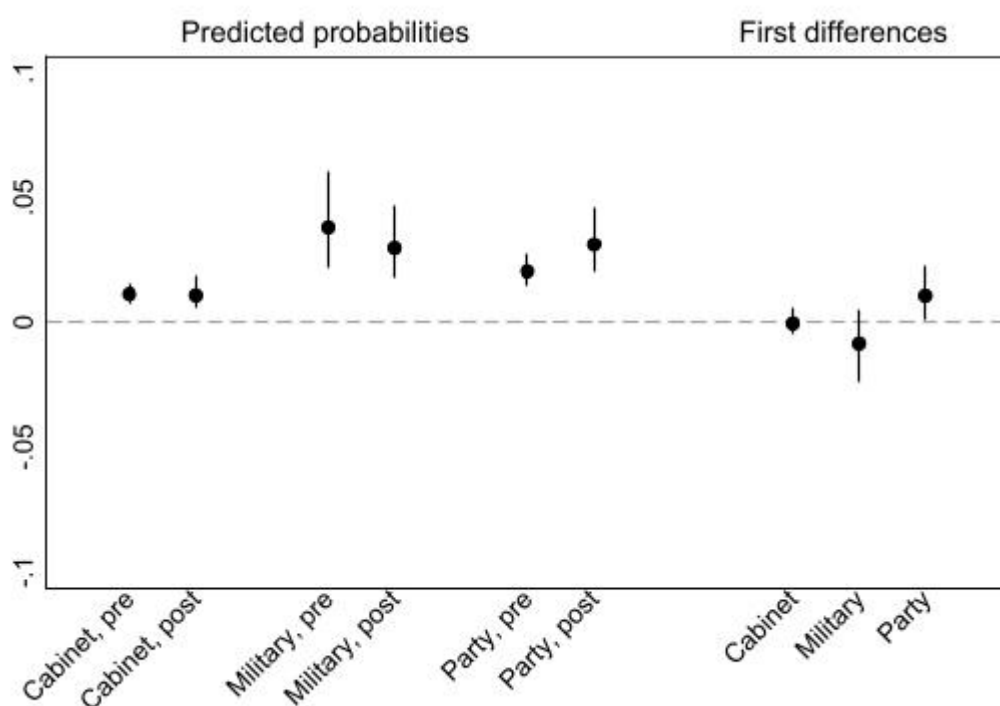


Notes: Figure shows the predicted probabilities of different types of elites attending leadership events before and after Kim Jong Il's stroke in August 2008 (left side) and the first differences of these predicted probabilities (right side). Bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

G.3 Past attendance

We re-estimate the main models in Table D1 but also account for whether elites attended the previous event since past attendance may influence future attendance. The substantive results from this analysis are visualized in Figure G2. Although the magnitude of the effect is smaller, Figure G2 provides evidence similar to the main findings: cabinet and military elites were neither more nor less likely to attend an event after Kim's stroke, while party elites were more likely to attend an event.

Figure G2: Accounting for past attendance: Predicted probabilities and first differences for the likelihood of different types of elites attending leadership events

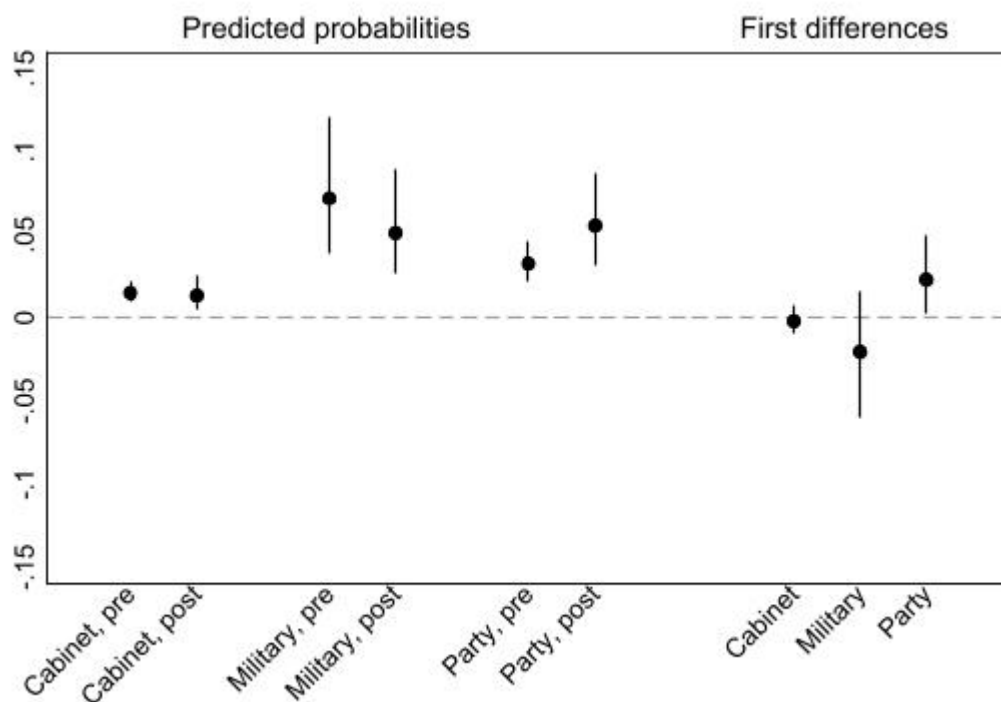


Notes: Figure shows the predicted probabilities of different types of elites attending leadership events before and after Kim Jong Il's stroke in August 2008 (left side) and the first differences of these predicted probabilities (right side). Bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

G.4 Omitting young elites

We re-estimate the main models in Table D1 but omit elites from the analysis who are one standard deviation younger than the youngest elite to attend an event, aside from Kim Jong Un. These elites were less likely to be invited to an event at an earlier point in their careers. The substantive results from this analysis are visualized in Figure G3. Figure G3 provides evidence similar to the main findings: cabinet and military elites were neither more nor less likely to attend an event after Kim's stroke, while party elites were more likely to attend an event.

Figure G3: Omitting young elites: Predicted probabilities and first differences for the likelihood of different types of elites attending leadership events



Notes: 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.

G.5 Event-based analysis

We used elite-event as the unit of analysis for the main models to include individual-level covariates. However, as this leads to a very large dataset and risks falsely inflating signs of statistical significance, we check that the results hold using an event-level dataset. Table G2 displays results from a series of negative binomial regression models using the counts of different types of elites (cabinet, military, and party) as the dependent variables. We find evidence consistent with the argument that Kim invited more party elites to attend events when he was preparing for succession (Model 3), but not other elites (Models 1 and 2). Substantively, further analysis suggests that the predicted number of party attendees before Kim's stroke is on average 2.07 elites; this rises to 3.27 party elites after Kim's stroke.⁸ These predictions are statistically distinguishable from each other at the 95 percent confidence level.

Table G2: Event-based results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Stroke	-0.49 (0.30)	-0.02 (0.14)	0.45*** (0.11)
Month	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	0.86* (0.35)	1.44*** (0.14)	1.66*** (0.21)
Dependent variable:	Cabinet	Military	Party
No. of attendees from the:			
N	1,573	1,573	1,573

Notes: *Month*² and *Month*³ included but not shown.

Heteroscedastic-robust standard errors are included.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

⁸ We use *Clarify* to run 1,000 simulations and draw predicted values from a multivariate normal distribution based on Model 3's estimates and variance-covariance to approximate the standard errors for the quantities of interest. See Gary King, Michael Tomz, and Jason Wittenberg, "Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (2000): 347–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2669316>.

G.6 Strict regression discontinuity in time design

We now analyze our data using a regression discontinuity (RD) in time design. The identifying assumption is that changes in the predicted probability of elites attending a leadership event after Kim Jong Il's stroke identifies our treatment effect – the effect of Kim Jong Il deciding to prepare for Kim Jong Un's succession – because other variables that affect an elite's subsequent likelihood of being invited to an event do not also change after the stroke. The treatment of Kim Jong Il having a stroke is effectively randomly assigned since elites cannot manipulate their treatment status. In other words, although it is possible that interactions between Kim and elites may influence Kim's health, elites cannot manipulate whether or not they are subjected to the treatment of Kim deciding to prepare for succession. The cutoff is Kim Jong Il's stroke. More specifically, we identify the cutoff as September 2008. Although Kim's stroke occurred in August 2008, we use September as the cutoff because Kim held some events in early August 2008 before he was incapacitated; he then reappeared in October 2008. Using September as the cutoff ensures that events closest to the cutoff are included in the analysis.

A key decision for the RD design is selecting a bandwidth around the cutoff to identify observations for inclusion in the analysis. Based on the empirical context, it is not immediately apparent what bandwidth is most appropriate. For instance, bandwidths of 10, 20, 30 months, or some other value *prima facie* all seem reasonable. Indeed, scholars often estimate a series of models with varying bandwidths to show how the results change based on these different bandwidths.⁹ However, absent clear implications for results based on different bandwidths, this strategy would raise more questions than answers. We therefore follow Cattaneo et al.'s suggestion to use a bandwidth that optimizes the mean squared error, with a triangular kernel function, because this leads to a consistent RD point estimator.¹⁰ Regarding estimation strategy, we implement a linear probability model. Specifically, we use ordinary least squares regression to estimate the following:

(1)

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Months to stroke}_i + \epsilon_i$$

for sub-samples of cabinet, military, and party elites, where Y_{it} represents the outcome of interest, whether elite i at time t attended a leadership event. *Months to stroke* is the number of months before and after September 2008; i.e., *Months to stroke* is the running variable where August 2008 equals -1, September 2008 equals 0, October 2008 equals

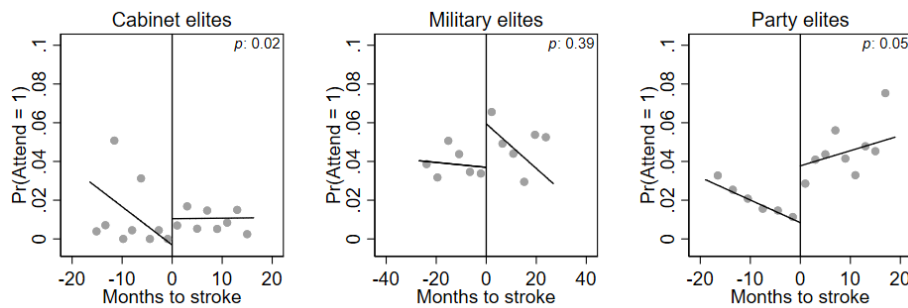
⁹ Nicholas Kuipers, "The Long-Run Consequences of The Opium Concessions for Out-Group Animosity on Java," *World Politics* 74, no. 3 (July 2022): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887122000041>; Vicente Valentim, Ana Ruipérez Núñez, and Elias Dinas, "Regression Discontinuity Designs: A Hands-on Guide for Practice," *Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica* 51, no. 2 (July 2021): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.27>.

¹⁰ Matias D. Cattaneo, Nicolás Idrobo, and Rocío Titiunik, *A Practical Introduction to Regression Discontinuity Designs: Foundations* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

1, and so on. We cluster standard errors by individual elites (ϵ_i) to account for the possibility that the error terms are correlated.¹¹

The results, which generally support our expectations, are visualized in Figure G4. Figure G4 illustrates that the RD effect is positive and statistically significant in the models for cabinet and party elites (at the 90% level for party elites ($p=0.051$), but significant at 95% confidence with controls; see Models 6 and 7 in Table G3), but not for military elites. Substantively, however, the RD effect is significantly bigger in the model for party elites than in the model for cabinet elites. In the model for party elites, the RD effect of 0.03 is the difference between a probability of a party elite attending an event of 0.008 at events just before Kim's stroke and 0.038 at events just after Kim's stroke. Thus, the RD effect for party elites represents an increase of 349.45 percent relative to the control mean.

Figure G4: Effect of Kim Jong Il's stroke on leadership event attendance for different types of elites



Notes: Linear regression with local sample means, represented by dots, based on an integrated mean squared error-optimal number of bins.

Table G3 shows the results of the linear regression models using the RD design. In addition to the results described above, which are in Models 1-3, Models 4-7 show that the positive and statistically significant RD effect for Party elites is robust to accounting for age and gender covariates, elite fixed effects, past event attendance, and omitting young elites.

¹¹ Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik.

Table G3: Regression discontinuity results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Months to stroke	0.02* (0.01)	0.04 (0.05)	0.03† (0.02)	0.03† (0.02)	0.03† (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)
Age and gender covariates				✓	✓	✓	✓
Elite fixed effects					✓	✓	✓
Past event attendance						✓	✓
Omitting young elites							✓
Sample	Cabinet elites	Military elites	Party elites	Party elites	Party elites	Party elites	Party elites
<i>N</i>	53,930	55,446	105,173	99,012	99,012	98,942	98,305

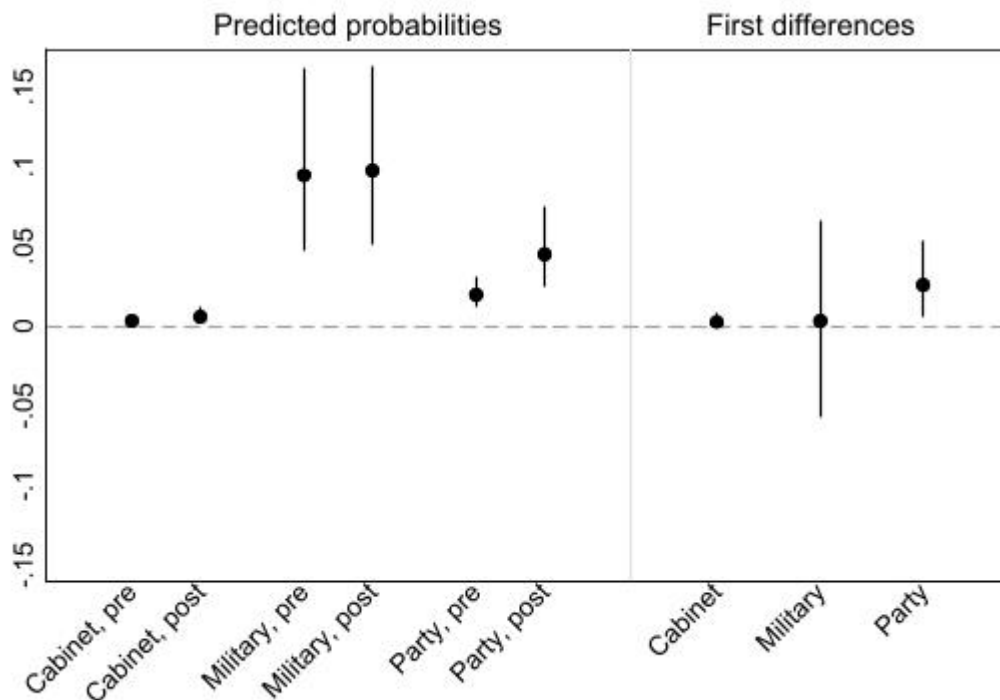
Notes: * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.01$

H Probing the argument's logic

H.1 Military events sub-sample

We re-estimate the main models in Table D1 on a sample of exclusively military events. The substantive results from this analysis are visualized in Figure H1. The results are similar to the main findings. We contend that the idea that Kim Jong Il increasingly invited KWP elites to events after his stroke because he wanted to focus on policies that KWP elites could help with cannot explain the increasingly likely attendance of KWP elites at military events after Kim's stroke.

Figure H1: Predicted probabilities and first differences for the likelihood of different types of elites attending military leadership events

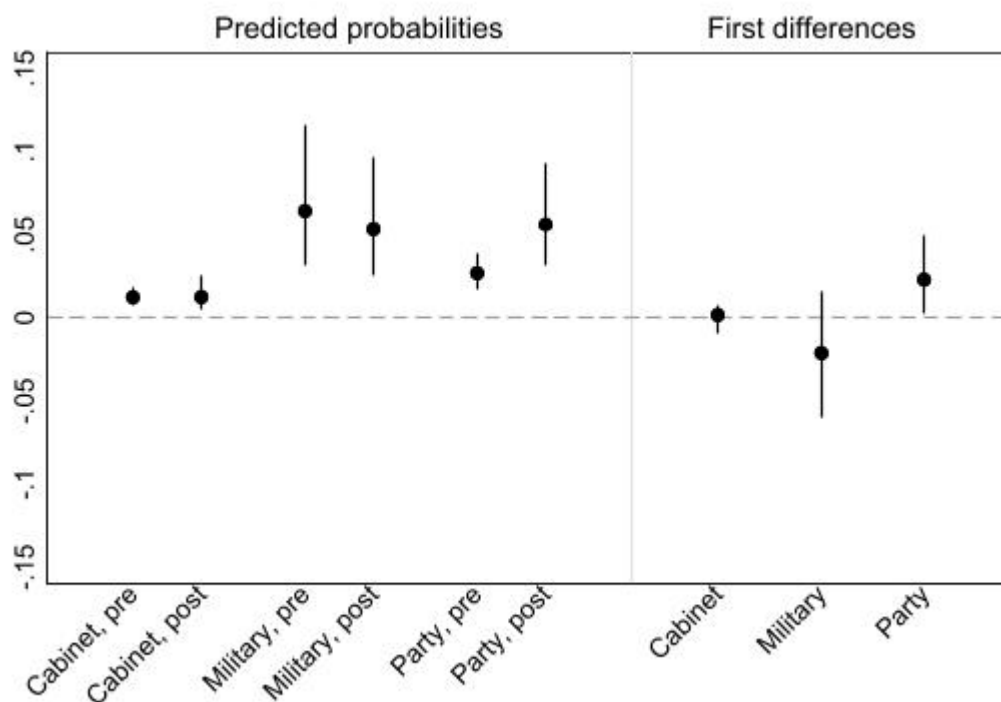


Notes: Figure shows the predicted probabilities of different types of elites attending military leadership events before and after Kim Jong Il's stroke in August 2008 (left side) and the first differences of these predicted probabilities (right side). Bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

H.2 Event size

We re-estimate the main models in Table D1 but also account for the size of the event — i.e., the number of elites who were invited — to ensure that Kim Jong Il was more likely to invite KWP elites to events after his stroke even when accounting for the possibility that he was just inviting more elites to events. The substantive results from this analysis are visualized in Figure H2. Figure H2 provides evidence similar to the main findings: cabinet and military elites were neither more nor less likely to attend an event after Kim's stroke, while party elites were more likely to attend an event.

Figure H2: Accounting for event size: Predicted probabilities and first differences for the likelihood of different types of elites attending leadership events



Notes: 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.