Understanding the Global Patrimonial Wave

Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein

The past decade has witnessed a resurgence of patrimonial rule not only in the developing world but also, more surprisingly, in the developed West. This resurgence carries potentially dire consequences for responding to a range of pressing problems. Understanding the sources of contemporary patrimonialism is hindered by assimilating the phenomenon into the familiar democracy/autocracy typology or by assuming that it is a function of failed modernization. This article identifies the patrimonial phenomenon and explores the contemporary global diffusion of patrimonial rule from its origins in postcommunist Russia, with a focus on how patrimonialism has manifested itself in policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some signs indicate that reestablishing bureaucratic predictability and expertise may be much harder than demolishing it. In some respects, the task may be more daunting than the salvation of democracy itself.

Over the past decade, there has been a marked decline in the number and quality of democracies around the world. Freedom House reports that overall levels of democracy have declined for 15 straight years; nearly 75% of the world's population now live in a country with deteriorating democratic standards (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021).[1] Of particular concern is the erosion of rights and freedoms not only in established authoritarian regimes but also in long-established democracies—including the United States. In many respects, the gloomy warnings offered in studies like Levitsky and Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* (2018) have proved sadly prescient.

During 2020, in the throes of the global COVID-19 pandemic, world leaders faced yet another set of grim prognoses—both for the defense of public health and for the preservation of economic stability. As the first year of the pandemic came to a close, clear patterns began to emerge in the responses to these twin challenges. In countries where public trust in large-scale state bureaucracies had been largely sustained through the crisis, political leaders were guided primarily by the advice of scientists and public health agencies. In a second set of countries, ruled by self-aggrandizing men who attacked impersonal legal procedures and the state bureaucracies that enforced them, public health professionals and scientists found themselves sidelined, their advice ignored or sometimes ridiculed. There is, of course, no direct or unmediated correlation between formal public health policies and outcomes of the pandemic, whether measured by deaths per million, hospitalizations, or the number of infected. Nor was there any perfect way to manage this crisis; public health professionals disagreed among themselves about the best way forward and the optimal measures for containing the virus (Smith 2021). Nevertheless, the differences in the mode of response and role played by experts versus "big men" in crafting these responses during the initial year of the pandemic are noteworthy and significant.

Thus, in the United Kingdom, the initially cavalier attitude of Prime Minister Boris Johnson led to a surge of new infections, ultimately including of the PM himself; later efforts to crack down on large gatherings throughout the year 2020 were half-hearted and inconsistent. In Russia, President Vladimir Putin was strangely reluctant to assert his personal authority over the Russian

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response to COVID-19, at first playing down the threat and later delegating key policy decisions to regional authorities; as a result, the virus spread to far-flung regions across Russia's enormous territory, and official figures of infection and fatality rates were widely disbelieved. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro mocked COVID-19 as nothing more than "a little flu"; like Boris Johnson, Bolsonaro eventually contracted the disease. Brazil's public health response to the ravages of the pandemic under Bolsonaro was uniformly acknowledged as abysmal. And in the United States, President Donald Trump veered wildly—sometimes in a single day—among outright denial of the pandemic, the undermining of lockdown measures, and irresponsible promotion of unproven and even dangerous medical treatments, including, to the horror of his aides, injections of disinfectant. The resulting public policy chaos made America the epicenter of the global pandemic. Trump himself, his wife, and his closest aides ultimately contracted the virus at a "superspreader" event at the White House.

The question naturally arises: Are these two phenomena—the global erosion of democracy and the generally embarrassing response of narcissistic male leaders around the world to COVID-19—causally linked? Do the poor coronavirus responses of leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro illustrate the weaknesses of contemporary "populism" more generally (Aron and Holland 2020)? And might evidence of state failure in dealing with the pandemic in countries led by male narcissists eventually lead to a restoration of public support for more conventional forms of liberal democratic leadership (Bufacchi 2020)?

We contend in this article that there is indeed a connection between negative trends in global regime change and in global public health policy—but this link is far more complex and indirect than it has typically been portrayed in the literature to date. In fact, the simple dichotomy between "democracy" and "authoritarianism" that has guided much contemporary political analysis does not serve us well in understanding the comparative quality of global responses to the pandemic. The stories of pre-vaccine 2020 are telling. In democratic Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu's inability to sustain predictable public policies for handling outbreaks of the virus cast Israeli society into a state of prolonged social and economic turmoil. Yet in other robust democracies like South Korea, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Australia—notwithstanding some flare-ups of the disease after its initial containment—politicians largely deferred to the professionals and took on the role of explaining and justifying public health policy (Patrick 2020). Authoritarian Singapore dealt with COVID-19 reasonably well, whereas President Lukashenka in authoritarian Belarus insisted for most of the year (before the protest wave that threatened to topple his regime) that the virus simply did not exist in his country (Geddie 2020; Ilyushina and Picheta 2020). In a third set of countries—again, some democratic, some authoritarian—the initial policy failure in confronting the pandemic was ultimately replaced by more systematic and scientifically led state responses. In democratic Germany, despite being hit hard in the first wave by skiers returning from vacation in Italy, the German government relied on the formidable capacity of its state-level governments to "flatten the curve" twice through public health measures. And in Leninist authoritarian China, where the outbreak of COVID-19 began, under General Secretary Xi Jinping's leadership, official secrecy and fear of reporting bad news to higher-ups deeply damaged the regime's initial response to the virus; however, China's subsequent draconian lockdown policies were undertaken on the advice of their own public health professionals (Burki 2020).

In short, regime type—as we typically understand it—has not by itself been a good predictor of national responses to the novel coronavirus. In this article we argue that what matters most in explaining comparative regime responses to the pandemic is the degree to which countries—whether formally democratic or authoritarian—were governed by rulers who consider themselves the unique embodiment of the political community. Such leaders generate a regime type that the great German sociologist Max Weber termed "patrimonialism" (Weber et al. 1978). Understood in this light, the major trend in regime change over the past decade has been not simply a move away from democratic institutions to authoritarianism but, more precisely, a wave of patrimonialism spreading through autocratic and democratic regions alike. Unfortunately, patrimonial regimes, however attractive they may be to angry and skeptical electorates, are simply awful at managing any complex problem of modern governance—responding to the global spread of COVID-19 very much included. And in the end, the damaging effects of patrimonial rule on modern state bureaucracies must inevitably undermine the integrity of the electoral procedures and constitutional frameworks on which democratic governance depends.

The response to the coronavirus has highlighted the dangers of patrimonial rule in the modern world, but these dangers will not disappear with the end of the pandemic. Failed future responses of patrimonial regimes to climate change or new public health crises could once again threaten all of humanity. Understanding the global patrimonial wave is therefore a pressing task for political science and comparative politics. Doing so, however, requires first properly situating patrimonialism in relation to the dominant classification of regime type in the discipline: democracy versus authoritarianism.

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Democracy versus Authoritarianism: A Misleading Distinction?

Few conceptual frameworks in the social sciences are as widespread and enduring as the presumed division of political regimes into two basic categories—either "democratic" or "authoritarian." Indeed, for mainstream social scientists today, the study of "regime change" is essentially synonymous with the study of transitions and alternations between democracy and authoritarianism in different world regions (Diamond 2015; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018). Nearly all of the major quantitative databases that track regime change organize their ratings on linear scales, with pure democracy on one pole and pure authoritarianism on the other. And although of course scholars have proposed a huge variety of suggested adjustments to the simple "democratic vs. authoritarian" regime dichotomy, most modifications involve making finer distinctions within these two categories—democracy and authoritarianism "with adjectives"—rather than using a different conceptual scheme altogether (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Levitsky and Way 2002). Today, not only social scientists but also journalists, diplomats, government analysts, and most members of the educated public accept the basic division between democracy and authoritarianism as unproblematic (Applebaum 2020).

Yet before the twentieth century, intellectuals and philosophers would have found it very strange to try to categorize types of political order in such simple terms. Contrary to popular myth, political philosophers in ancient Greece did not uphold democratic rule as either particularly desirable or enduring. It would take another two millennia for political theorists such as Montesquieu and Madison to propose broadly constitutional, representative government as a "universally" superior political form. Even then, as today, we still wrestle with "democratic" theory as it was articulated and institutionalized in the American and French Revolutions—that is, as inextricably paired with the hypocritical and brutal exclusion of enslaved people, women, those without property, and the populations of conquered nations.

Only in the modern era—and particularly after the defeat of the Nazi regime in World War II and the unfolding of the Cold War—did the normative commitments of social scientists unite much more openly on the side of socially inclusive democratic institutions. In the wake of the global destruction wrought by the totalitarian regimes of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, hoary defenses of "aristocratic virtue" lost intellectual respectability among educated elites. In the new Western social-scientific consensus synthesized by theorists such as Talcott Parsons, democracy was portrayed as the inevitable, functionally superior endpoint of human political history. Logically, the persistence of "authoritarian" rule in any guise now appeared as atavistic, resting on incomplete or interrupted social "modernization"; as a corollary, ideologies defending authoritarianism were portrayed as dangerously reactionary (Janos 1986).

The resulting schema is one in which all politics involves degrees of rule by "the leader" or the "people." There is nothing wrong per se with this approach to analyzing regimes, but as with any set of categories, the question is whether they capture the range of phenomena we seek to explain. The great divide between democracy and authoritarianism draws our attention to the question of who rules and the conditions under which leaders ascend to power, but it tells us little about how rule is carried out. We therefore need to complicate the basic distinction with another one that can capture the specific pathology we want to explain: the deconstruction of modern administrative states.[2] To understand our contemporary predicament, we must introduce a second dimension of regime type, one not reducible to the first: patrimonialism versus bureaucracy.

More than a century ago, the German sociologist Max Weber alerted us to this crucial distinction. Rather than focusing on the selection of leaders, Weber considered the key act of politics to be obedience to the leader's command. Such obedience is more likely and consistent, Weber argued, when subordinates subjectively believe that orders from their superiors are "legitimate"—that is, that they have a duty, and not merely a self-interested motive, to obey. Without obedience to commands there can be no government, no matter how it is chosen. The core link is between the leader and his or her administrative "staff." This relationship can be highly personal and intimate, or it can be impersonal and legalistic. The staff accept commands as legitimate for basically one of two reasons: because of their sense of duty to the person of the leader or because of their sense of duty to law and abstract rules. For much of human history, this sense of duty was based primarily on personal relationships. During periods of social crisis, followers might obey orders under the spell of a leader's personal charisma. Yet charismatic leadership generally does not last long. The patrimonial bond, when durable, was emotional, one of respect, friendship, and devotion, embodied in the beloved monarch whose royal lineage had ruled since "time immemorial." Finding a loyal staff is not easy, so in its purest form "patrimonialism" amounts to rule by the family and friends of the leader. To provide a succinct definition, a patrimonial regime is a form of legitimate domination in which the ruler and his staff fuse administration with personal authority, considering the state itself to be a "family business" of sorts (Adams 2005; Weber et al. 1978).

Patrimonial rule characterized much of the premodern world. The advent of modern capitalism and military organization was accompanied by the creation of what

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Weber termed "rational-legal" bureaucracies, staffed by a civil service of educated professionals, who followed rules and procedures and who were recruited on the basis of merit rather than personal relationships. The basic grounds on which commands were obeyed shifted from duty to the person of the ruler to duty to the impersonal abstraction of the rules themselves. Such bureaucracies brought the rule of law and expertise, and when they worked, they made the developed capitalist West powerful, productive, and relatively safe.

Political scientists have ascribed poor economic performance at various points in time in Africa, Eurasia, and Latin America to "*neo*patrimonialism" as a general description of the political economies of developing countries (Bratton and van de Walle 1994; Giraudy et al. 2020; Laruelle 2012). Clapham's (1985, 48) definition of neopatrimonialism captures much of this work: "a form of organization in which relationships of a broadly patrimonial type pervade a political and administrative system which is formally constructed on rational-legal lines. Officials hold positions in bureaucratic organizations with powers which are formally defined but exercise those powers … as a form of private property."

This literature, emerging as it does from the paradigm of modernization theory, has focused primarily on the developing world rather than on advanced capitalist countries and has sought to explain bad governance as the cause of poor economic performance. In his biting and convincing critique of the concept of neopatrimonialism, Mkandawire (2015, 565) highlights its modernization-theoretic foundations—"neopatrimonialism is, then, a marriage of tradition and modernity"—and maintains that it suffers from the same pathologies that plagued modernization theory of an earlier era: teleology, cultural determinism, functionalism, and unfalsifiability. To take but one example, neopatrimonialism may be a constant in undermining formal institutional integrity, but how then can it account for such large variations in economic performance over time and space? At a minimum, Mkandawire maintains, the concept has been stretched beyond utility.

From our standpoint, the earlier literature on neopatrimonialism is inadequate for understanding the origins of the contemporary patrimonial wave. This literature would have expected any future diffusion of patrimonial forms of rule to be confined mostly to the Global South, perhaps spreading northward through "corruption" in a few particularly vulnerable, less consolidated liberal democracies. Indeed, a major thrust of the earlier literature on neopatrimonialism was studying the conditions under which it might be overthrown through revolution, military coup, or democratic breakthrough—not to assess the possibility that powerful new patrimonial regimes might emerge in previously consolidated democracies (Snyder 1992). Instead, as we maintain in our later discussion, the new patrimonial wave emerged in postcommunist Russia as a direct assault on Western neoliberal ideology and later spread to the core states of the global liberal order. In short, our analysis requires that we devote attention to examining the "unexpected" cases of patrimonialism affecting seemingly "modern," Western nations such as Britain, Israel, and the United States. Our analysis emerges not out of modernization theory, but from an understanding of how the challenges of global capitalism have influenced leaders' efforts to build political legitimacy. We therefore drop the "neo" and refer simply to "patrimonialism" to denote the return of a phenomenon in the West that most scholars had considered a relic of the past.

Both patrimonial and bureaucratic modes of administration are "pure" types. Reality, of course, is more complicated. One can readily identify elements of "bureaucracy" in ancient Egypt and "patrimonialism" in twenty-first-century urban America. Weber himself understood this, being deeply influenced by his early twentieth-century travels around the United States with its machine politics and powerful political "bosses" (Offe 2005; Skowronek 1982). But he considered the process of bureaucratic rationalization, once underway, to be sticky. Public authority and wealth accumulation would increasingly be separated; obedience would be based on impersonal, legal authority; and the power of specialized knowledge meant that even elected politicians might find themselves when dealing with bureaucrats as "dilettantes facing the experts." Weber warned of patrimonialism's reappearance under the right conditions, in particular in the anticapitalist dictatorship emerging in Soviet Russia after 1917. But neither Weber nor later mainstream social scientists anticipated the vengeance with which the patrimonial principle might eventually reassert itself as a competing form of political legitimacy in advanced capitalist societies.

Once we consider this possibility, however, the dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism seems inadequate to understand the central challenges facing the contemporary world. We therefore need a different typology of regime types. Authoritarian leaders may govern through remarkably effective state bureaucracies, and a leader may be democratically elected but still seek to legitimate his or her rule patrimonially. Increasingly, elected leaders have sought to demolish bureaucratic administrative states ("deep states," they sometimes call them) built up over decades in favor of rule by family and friends. The consequences of this shift in state legitimacy for the citizenry are profound.

How is patrimonial legitimation possible in the modern world? Although one might expect that citizens who have enjoyed the fruits of the rule of law and bureaucratic administration would not easily tolerate patrimonial policy failures, one important implication of our analysis is the need to think about modes of legitimation in less linear ways. Clearly, the disruptions of global capitalism have

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created unexpected new openings for charismatic leaders to galvanize followers with promises of salvation from the impersonalism, complexity, and interdependence of the modern world (Tismaneanu 1998). Typically, charismatic forms of legitimacy are unstable, and charismatic movements quickly collapse. But sometimes, depending on the particular mix of appeals to principle and affect involved, charismatic movements routinize in either a procedural and bureaucratic (rational-legal) or a patrimonial (traditional) direction (Hanson 2010). Given the widespread social anger generated by the perceived failures and inequities of global neoliberalism, the dominant responses of its opponents have been heavily driven by emotion rather than by principle. Thus, the routinization of the charisma of contemporary antiliberal strongmen has been almost completely patrimonial—built on fidelity to the (typically male) leader posing as the personification of the "true" political community—rather than bureaucratic in nature (Charrad and Adams 2011). In what follows, we elaborate this logic.

How Patrimonialism Reemerged in the Twenty-First Century

The story of patrimonialism's return in advanced capitalist states begins with the by now familiar trend of rising inequality over the past three decades. This phenomenon is global and has been documented in various comparative studies of income gain since approximately 1980. Lakner and Milanovic (2013) maintained that, although global economic inequality had declined since 1988, the greatest gains had been made by the lower middle and middle classes of Asia and the top 1% of earners in the advanced capitalist countries. Piketty, Saez, and Zucman (2018) amended this picture to show even starker gains made at the top, modest gains in the Global South, and genuinely stagnant growth for the bottom 90% in Western Europe and the United States. The truly spectacular income growth accrued not only to the top 1% but to miniscule numbers of spectacularly wealthy individuals. In 2019 the 10 wealthiest billionaires in the world had greater wealth than the GDPs of Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Sweden, and a range of other medium-sized countries.

Scholars disagree on the causes of rising inequality. As Sheri Berman (2021) notes, economists point to big structural factors such as trade, technology, and education, whereas political scientists stress policy choices, gerrymandering, and voter suppression that favored the rich over the poor. Piketty (2017), for example, maintained that systematic differences in returns to capital and labor account for the dramatic increases in wealth and income inequalities over the past decades. Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2020), by contrast, point to the behavior and resources of powerful political actors, especially the wealthy, that have turned political parties on the right into machines to protect the very rich at all costs.

Whatever the cause or combination of causes, the results have been notable changes in the distribution of wealth across all capitalist societies over the past four decades, with the most spectacular disparities in the United States itself. Whereas liberal democracy had been saved in the first half of the twentieth century by the efforts of the administrative state and the heroic struggle against fascism, rising inequality and stagnating incomes among the middle classes in the last quarter of the twentieth and the first two decades of the twenty-first century brought into question the value of expertise, education, and the administrative state itself. The increasing divergence of lived experiences between the winners and losers in the global market economy has thus created a fertile social soil for the promulgation of antiliberal movements and ideologies. Conspiracy theories about the machinations of the "deep state," however far-fetched, appear plausible to many in a world where supposedly "meritocratic" elites seem to hobnob far too cozily with the super-rich (Sandel 2020).

Yet resentment about widening inequality by itself cannot explain why patrimonial rule has emerged in the twenty-first century as the most powerful political alternative to the administrative state. Indeed, based on past historical cases, one might have expected such sociological developments to have generated more support for the revolutionary Left rather than the reactionary Right. To understand the origins of the patrimonial wave, we have to shift our focus from analysis of socioeconomic "structures" to the role of particular political "agents" who have actively coordinated in support of patrimonial strongmen in diverse countries around the world.

In this context, understanding the reasons for the failure of the liberal capitalist economic model in much of the postcommunist world—and, in particular, in post-Soviet Russia—is of critical importance. In many ways, the disillusionment of the vast majority of Russians with technocratic advice on economic policy over the course of the 1990s and the subsequent rise of Putin's patrimonial regime in reaction to this in the 2000s parallel and presage the global spread of patrimonial politics after the global economic crisis of 2008 (Holmes and Krastev 2020).

The fall of communism in east-central Europe and Eurasia from 1989–91 meant personal liberation for hundreds of millions of people previously oppressed by Leninist one-party dictatorships across Eastern and Central Europe. Yet in retrospect, the timing of the communist collapse was quite inauspicious for the formulation of effective policy responses to the turbulent social context of postcommunist societies (Ekiert, Kubik, and Vachudova 2007). That Stalinist economic planning had appeared to fail so spectacularly, at the very apogee of the "Washington Consensus" about the supposed virtues of radical market liberalization, meant that Western and postcommunist liberal advisers alike were nearly unanimous on the need to dismantle state control over the economy as rapidly as possible.

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As a few lonely voices pointed out at the time, the real problem facing postcommunist elites was not so much the absence of private markets—which had sprung up spontaneously and ubiquitously in the wake of the collapse of the planned economy in any case—but precisely the lack of coherent state bureaucracies capable of carrying out consistent long-term economic policies of any sort, whether "neoliberal" or "evolutionary" (Cirtautas 1995). Unfortunately, in the postcommunist context, arguments for the establishment of a rational-legal administrative state sounded suspiciously like excuses to subsidize decaying state industries and collective farms. With no effective state institutions left to enforce limits on the theft of former state assets, the sudden and spectacular implosion of Leninist parties throughout Eurasia led to an orgy of short-term elite self-enrichment that shocked and disgusted the public. To be clear, the deleterious structural legacies of the Soviet economic system were bound to produce massive economic dislocations throughout the former Soviet space, regardless of which particular formal economic policies were adopted in a given country. Yet tragically and needlessly, this corrupt free-for-all was initially celebrated in the West as a "return to the market economy," thereby indelibly linking "neoliberalism" with the excesses of the "wild 1990s" in the popular imagination (Holmes 2009; Karklins 2005).

In east-central Europe, the general political and social consensus about the desirability of joining the European Union, along with the reasonable prospect of achieving this goal, attenuated social discontent with the economic "transition." In Russia, however, public opinion over time began more and more firmly to associate Western-style "democracy" with state corruption, economic disruption, and social chaos. And with Russia's "democrats" seemingly opposed in principle to the restoration of state power in any form, the political field was clear for antiliberal statism to command ever-greater social support.

It is hardly surprising, then, that when Boris Yeltsin designated Vladimir Putin as his successor as Russia's president in 1999, Putin set the goal of rebuilding the Russian state—or as he memorably put it, "restoring the vertical of power"—as his top political priority (Fish 2001). Nor is it surprising that this goal proved to be enormously popular among vast majorities of Russian citizens. Over the course of the 2000s, with Russian public opinion cheering him along, Putin quickly dispatched the main forces opposed to his consolidation of state power: Russia's ultra-wealthy "oligarchs," opposition political parties, and regional strongmen with their own political machines. The fact that Putin's first two terms in office coincided with a dramatic increase in the price of oil and gas on world markets made his claims to have rescued Russia from oblivion even more plausible. Yet with Marxism-Leninism and liberalism both thoroughly discredited, Putin was not able to articulate any alternative ideological basis underpinning the legitimacy of his increasingly centralized state apparatus.

Instead, over the course of his long reign, Putin has increasingly relied on a patrimonial Russian "tradition" as the core of his case for state legitimacy (Robinson 2017). His personal rule is presented as the culmination of all manifestations of strong state power over the course of Russia's long history, from the divine right rule of Russia's tsars to the victory of the Red Army over the Nazis. Loyalty to Putin's state—and, it follows, obedience to his direct commands—is put forward as a duty of every Russian citizen who cares about the unity and survival of the country in the face of hostile foreign threats. Those with direct personal ties to the leader— whether through past connections to his hometown of Saint Petersburg, through long-standing loyalty to the security services, or simply through a record of unquestioned obedience since his rise to power—are granted remarkable leeway to commandeer Russian assets and lord it over those with weaker connections (Åslund 2019). By implication, individuals who openly oppose Putin "must" be in league with foreign enemies of Russian statehood, whether they pose as "scientific experts" questioning the efficacy of Putin's policies, advocates of "democratic freedom" demonstrating against violations of electoral procedures and legal norms, or leaders of nongovernmental organizations trying to eke out an independent existence in an increasingly repressive polity.

Since the end of Putin's bizarre experiment to preserve Russian "constitutional law" by switching places with Russia's prime minister (and Putin ultra-loyalist) Dmitry Medvedev from 2008–12, such patrimonial tropes have been repeated with tireless consistency in Russian state media. Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014 were accompanied by a further escalation of patrimonial rhetoric—including the claim that Crimea was "sacred" territory for Russia as the place of origin of Russian Orthodoxy. With Putin's decision in 2020 to change the Yeltsin constitution yet again, this time essentially to rule as "president for life," the last vestiges of "rational-legal" legitimacy in Russian politics were eviscerated.

Thus, the end result of the failure of liberal democratic reform in postcommunist Russia has been the consolidation of a powerful new patrimonial state in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Yet under different global conditions, the story might well have remained primarily of interest to regional specialists on Eurasia. Instead, Putin's model for restoring state power as an antidote to "failed" liberalism would become an attractive alternative for influential opponents of the Western global order. And the 2008 collapse of the global financial system created the perfect conditions for patrimonial diffusion—in authoritarian and democratic countries alike.

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Tracking the Wave: From East to West

As a great power, Putin's Russia sought to expand its international influence. As a regime built on patrimonial legitimacy, it has naturally favored "traditionalist" parties in Europe and in the United States. The core of patrimonialism is the appropriation of the means of state administration by the ruler who treats it as a "business" of sorts. In the context of rational-legal bureaucratic regimes, patrimonialism is necessarily destructive. It aims to demolish spheres of bureaucratic authority by introducing the principle of personal loyalty to the ruler within all previously autonomous spheres of impersonal, procedural state administration. With renewed resources after the rise in petroleum prices in the early 2000s, Putin's elite could most easily export this model closer to home, where state traditions more strongly resembled Russia's and bureaucratic rationalism was weakly developed. It would be inaccurate to say that Putin somehow "bought" these polities or fully "controlled" the politics of the states emerging from the former Soviet Union, but in each case the Putin regime could and did assist patrimonial parties and groupings (Wallander 2007). The ideologies varied. In some cases, the message was particularist; in others, pan-Slavist—but in every instance it was antiliberal and anti-universalist.

In much of the former Soviet Union, patrimonial leaders confronted few obstacles in consolidating power. Even in Ukraine, the spirited and inspiring popular resistance to the expansion of Putin's patrimonial empire has not managed to overcome a long stalemate between pro-Russian secessionists in the Donbass—aided and abetted by Russian irregular troops—and pro-European forces in the rest of the country. Farther afield, however, in the new EU member states, the barriers to expansion of the patrimonial principle were initially more formidable. In Central Europe, the entire project of EU enlargement based on "conditionality" had in large measure been an exercise in modern state construction, building up the regulatory capacity to govern markets (Vachudova 2005). Of course, EU conditionality frequently devolved into exercises in mimicry rather than genuine bureaucratic rectitude, but any attempt to "reintroduce" patrimonialism would require dismantling part of the bureaucratic edifice that had already been built or harnessing it to the personal needs of the ruler.

Outside the former Soviet Union, nowhere did this combination of messages initially find a warmer welcome than in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, a country that confronted stiff economic competition from exposure to broader markets, the shock of cultural modernization in the run-up to and aftermath of its accession to the EU in 2004, and the immigration crisis that came out of the Syrian civil war (Beauchamp 2018; Böröcz 2012). Over time, Orbán harnessed the Hungarian bureaucracy and judiciary to his personal interests. Russia did not call the shots in Hungary; most of its direct assistance appears to have flowed to Jobbik, an extremist party to the right of Orbán's Fidesz.[3] Even so, in Putin, Orbán found a kindred ideological spirit who not only provided a cheap alternative to Western energy supplies but, perhaps more importantly, was also an adamant opponent of Western liberalism, both in its political and cultural forms (Palonen 2019). Much attention has been devoted to Orbán's assault on the media, the use of Russian-style "political technologies" to field bogus candidates and so divide the anti-Fidesz vote, and the unceasing drumbeat of pro-government propaganda. Equally important, however, was his assault on the state itself, especially the country's court system, the mass firing of civil servants, and the installation of personal allies in key bureaucratic positions (Buckley and Byrne 2017; Gorondi 2012; János and Hajdu 2018). Orbán's genius was in asserting the patrimonial principle with trappings of formal "legality." Increasingly authoritarian in orientation, the locus of his rule centered on a small group of friends and beneficiaries. In turn, Orbán's Hungary has become a model for other would-be patrimonial leaders and groupings in nearby countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—which supporters of rational-legal bureaucracy in each case have mobilized to resist, with varying degrees of success.

Patrimonialism has since spread well beyond Europe, but its core features have everywhere remained remarkably similar: an assault on the civil service and judiciary in the service of personalistic power. Israel is a prime example.[4] Although within the Israeli political firmament, right-wing revisionist Zionism is best known for its hard line on security issues, its founders actually placed greater value on legality and bureaucratic rectitude than its competitors on the Left (Ben-Hur 1993). Menachem Begin, when he came to power in 1977 after almost three decades in the political wilderness, left virtually untouched a civil service and judiciary staffed almost entirely during Labor Party rule. In contrast, Prime Minister Netanyahu, since the beginning of his second term in office in 2009, has increasingly departed from this bedrock principle and sought to build his personal power and reduce the constraints posed by the rule of law (Debre 2019). To do so he has attacked the courts, the police, and the civil service. Successive governments led by Netanyahu have sought either to disempower the judiciary or pack it with loyalists to secure "the complete subjection of the judiciary to the executive" (Levi and Agmon 2020, 12). Likud has also attempted to pass several laws to prevent police investigation of the prime minister (Levinson 2019). Not only did Netanyahu's Likud increasingly become the "Bibi party," but his supporters also began to refer to the civil service with the American epithet "deep state," portraying it as a force seeking to thwart the popular will (Weitz 2020).

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This trend picked up steam as Netanyahu's government faced dual charges of incompetence and political favoritism during the coronavirus crisis. Observers had long picked up on the tendency toward "personalization" in Israeli politics (Rahat and Sheafer 2007)—a trend more pronounced in the larger than in the smaller parties—but the assault on the state itself was something new. In early 2021, the Netanyahu government's early mobilization, rapid purchase, and vaccination of wide swaths of Israel's population relied heavily on bureaucracies built up earlier, but in no way diminished the goal of dismantling the core bureaucratic and legal structures created over previous decades (Gur 2020). In fact, rather than credit the public health bureaucracies with an effective response, Netanyahu billed the purchase and distribution of the vaccine as primarily his own personal achievement.

Perhaps most striking, however, has been the re-patrimonialization of state authority in the erstwhile heartlands of the rule of law itself—Great Britain and the United States. Prime Minister Boris Johnson was elected to complete the country's departure from the European Union that his predecessor Theresa May had bungled. Johnson's combative and confrontational style of politics may have been appropriate for remaining focused on Brexit in some broad sense (even if Johnson's people were often fuzzy on the details). His singled-minded determination, however, to distance his country from "Brussels bureaucrats," along with cabinet appointments based more on personal loyalty than competence, inhibited coordination with European public health experts and common procurement schemes at the start of the epidemic (Sparrow, Badshah, and Busby 2019). The result during the first year of the pandemic was a remarkably chaotic response in which senior civil servants found themselves ignored or cast aside (Rawnsley 2020).[5]

The United States is the most shocking case of all (Riley 2017). The coronavirus highlighted an American state, so formidable on the global stage with its capacity to project unparalleled military force, as incapable of fulfilling crucial public health functions. The national public health bureaucracy, as it evolved under President Donald Trump, was overwhelmed and quickly found itself unable to manage the country's newfound status in spring 2020 as the global epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic.

The problem was partly due to American federalism, in which the states are left to perform so many public health tasks. But it was more than that. Crucial bureaucracies went unstaffed in the Trump administration, with agency heads unconfirmed by the Senate (Rose 2020). That was a feature, not a bug. Trump preferred it that way because it fostered personal dependence. "I like 'acting,'" he noted in 2019 when asked about having so many "acting" cabinet secretaries. "It gives me more flexibility" (Naylor 2019). All presidents grapple with the trade-off between expertise and political loyalty in staffing senior positions (Lewis 2007), but in the Trump administration personal loyalty took precedence over professional qualifications or adherence to shared ideals.

The American state had been assembled gradually over decades to deal with an increasingly large and complex society. But Trump's presidency meant a major step backward from the perspective of administrative competence. Whereas during the campaign Trump promised to staff his administration with the "best people," once in power this vision devolved into a preference for family, friends, and cronies. Rather than maintain a sharp distinction between his private and the public interest, Trump deliberately blurred the lines between them (Stolberg 2020).

Perhaps most directly comparable with our other cases described earlier, Trump's disdain for the civil service was apparent from the very outset of his administration. At times he seemed intent on choosing secretaries of departments who disliked their department's mission or even existence: Andrew Puzder at the Department of Labor, Rick Perry as Secretary of Energy, and Betsy DeVos in the Department of Education are the most prominent examples. The assault encompassed the entire state. From the first days of the administration, political appointees regarded as unqualified were deployed to purge the bureaucracy. Senior civil servants with expertise in food security, climate science, HIV/AIDS prevention, and childhood nutrition were sidelined, consistently ignored, or shown the door (Reilly 2019). In June 2019 the US Department of Agriculture ordered the relocation of hundreds of researchers in the Economic Research Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture from Washington, DC, to Kansas City, Missouri. Almost two-thirds chose to quit instead (Kennedy 2019; Morris 2019). Although the broad exodus of career officials from the US Department of State received much attention, the elimination of a small team in the White House focusing specifically on pandemic preparedness did not—that is, until the spring of 2020.

Trump distrusted anyone who might diminish his personal power and authority. He called on experts to pitch in when needed—especially when he became ill himself with the virus in October 2020—only to shunt them aside when they contradicted or outshined him (Chappell 2020). When upstaged by Dr. Anthony Fauci and the (much-diminished) public health bureaucracy he represented at the daily White House coronavirus briefing, Trump repeatedly sidelined experts until he hit on those less likely to appear to challenge his wisdom and instincts (Haberman 2020).

Steve Bannon, one of Trump's campaign managers in the run-up to the 2016 election, had invoked none other than Vladimir Lenin in his call to "smash the administrative state" (Fisher 2017). Anti-big government and low-tax Republicans distrusted Bannon's revolutionary rhetoric

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but saw in Trump's presidency the potential to reduce taxes and realize the old Reaganite dream of shrinking the welfare state and "big government." This ideological symbiosis between the libertarian and patrimonial projects, although found in other re-patrimonializing countries, has been particularly pronounced in the American variant of the global project. Yet increasingly it has become clear that a key assumption of the libertarian Right was incorrect: the alternative to the modern administrative state is not "the market" but rather patrimonialism and the disappearance of the very public goods the market needs to function efficiently (Kopstein 2020).

As the pandemic worsened, what the United States really needed was an adept and powerful national public health bureaucracy, on the scale of the Department of Defense, that could enforce mask mandates, carry out mass testing and genetic sequencing, provide reliable and up-to-date information, and coordinate industry and the academy to provide vaccines, treatments, and sufficient gear for first responders. Instead, the demolition of bureaucratic capacity and expertise gravely limited the government's understanding of the virus's spread and diminished its ability to respond (Armour et al. 2020). Precisely at the moment the country needed an impersonal, professional state bureaucracy to be pulling the levers, it could not have it. Instead, patrimonial rule demanded personal recognition of the leader for government services large and small, from Trump's name on stimulus checks to a letter from him accompanying boxes of surplus food to the needy from the Department of Agriculture. By the end of 2020, the patrimonial assault on the administrative state, although facing stiff resistance in some quarters, had left in its wake a great deal of damage. Illustrating his commitment to the patrimonial principle one final time, Trump decreed the removal of employment protections from a broad range of civil servants in the final weeks of his presidency (Eisenmann 2020).

Patrimonialism's Future: Reversing the Wave?

We have argued in this article that global political trends over the past decade are best characterized not as the ascendance of "authoritarian populism" over "democracy," but instead as a "wave of patrimonial legitimacy" sweeping from its origins in the postcommunist world to the rest of the developed and developing world. The resurgence of patrimonialism in late capitalist societies has played a key role in shaping the anemic international response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also threatens global coordination on a wide variety of other pressing human challenges in the twenty-first century, including climate change, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the defense of human rights. Left unchecked, the further spread of the patrimonial principle across nation-states around the world will badly damage the coherence of state bureaucracies everywhere, with ultimately parlous consequences for the political inclusion of diverse social groups, economic equity and efficiency, and general social well-being.

The pathologies of patrimonial rule in the modern world should also concern those interested in the future of democracy. Although not identical with authoritarianism, a world of cliques ruling personalistically is bound to undermine the legal framework that enables mass representative democratic institutions. For this reason, the decline in Freedom House scores mentioned at the outset of this article is clearly related to the patrimonial wave—but the two phenomena are not identical. Confronting this wave thus means renewed attention not only to defending representative democracy but also to two of its oft-neglected prerequisites: the rule of law and a merit-based civil service. Although the conceptual distinction between rational-legal bureaucratic rule and patrimonial rule is not reducible to the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism, it is nonetheless true that electoral processes and constitutional norms cannot survive long when patrimonial legitimacy begins to dominate the political arena. If the wave of the pandemic that began in late 2020 and extended into 2021 proves to be too much for already weakened Western states to handle successfully, it is quite possible that patrimonial executives appealing to angry and skeptical electorates will emerge triumphantly in a greater number of previously consolidated democracies.

For political scientists, recognizing and naming patrimonial rule is a first step to understanding the conditions under which the wave may begin to subside. By misunderstanding patrimonialism as "authoritarianism" or "populism," we fail to recognize how its malign effects can emerge in autocratic and democratic regimes and in developed and developing countries alike—coming to power in some countries through the usurpation of previous constitutional norms and in others through the building of patrimonial parties that win power in free and fair democratic elections. We also misunderstand why patrimonialism is appealing to so many social groups who perceive themselves as marginalized by the global liberal order. Patrimonialism is, after all, a form of political legitimacy: those who support it and the strongmen who propound it genuinely prefer an order built around personal loyalty and traditional definitions of the nation to one built on impersonal, professional rules and bureaucratic procedures.

That said, the benefits of modern life in the twenty-first century, including the provision of advanced health care to fight the global pandemic, do depend on coherent state administration. In the United States, it became clear to large majorities of American citizens that what Trump's supporters call the "deep state" is really just the state. Only the most radical libertarians, then, would wish to ally

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themselves with patrimonialism in a battle to destroy rational-legal government altogether. The remainder of the citizenry, not only in the United States but also in patrimonial countries around the world—in Putin's Russia, Johnson's United Kingdom, Orbán's Hungary, Erdoğan's Turkey, Bolsonaro's Brazil, Duterte's Philippines, and elsewhere—would clearly benefit from laws that are enforced consistently, political systems not in thrall to ruling cliques, economies that function predictably and openly, and societies where universal norms of fairness are recognized as binding.

The victory of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris over Donald J. Trump and Mike Pence could thus represent a major turning point in stemming the patrimonial tide within the most powerful country in the world. Some caution, however, is in order. In other developed countries where patrimonial leaders remain in power, they can still use the residual expertise and state capacity built up in previous eras, making the long-term damage done to bureaucratic effectiveness in these countries less obvious to their supporters. And even in countries where the patrimonial wave turns out to be transitory, we still have an imperfect understanding of the severity of the damage that might be done to the administrative state during the patrimonial interlude. Some signs indicate that reestablishing bureaucratic predictability and expertise may be much harder than demolishing it. In some respects, the task may be more daunting than the salvation of democracy itself.

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Notes

1 Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), reviewing the annual V-Dem report, explicitly address the democratic deterioration in existing democracies.
2 The large literature on populism touches on this issue but remains mostly focused on its relationship to democracy and authoritarianism rather than the crucial leader–staff relationship (see Grzymała-Busse 2020; Mudde 2004).
3 Between 2015 and 2020, Jobbik began to redefine itself as a more measured conservative party and is presently more moderate than Fidesz.
4 To be clear: we see the mechanism for diffusion of patrimonialism beyond Europe as involving emulation by antiliberal rulers of "successful" global models. We are not arguing that the diffusion of patrimonialism to Israel had anything to do with the earlier emigration of Soviet Jews to that country.
5 The United Kingdom's vaccine rollout in 2021 contrasted favorably with its public health response during 2020.

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