

Leader Tenure and Leader Power

Abstract

Despite its empirical ambiguity, the concept of leader power remains central to our understanding of politics. We argue that this recalcitrant concept may be successfully operationalized by time in office—a proxy that is directly observable across time and settings. First, we lay out a theoretical rationale. Second, we test the proposition empirically by associating tenure with existing measures. Subjective assessments of leader power are drawn from experts, LLM queries, and Google searches. Institutional limits on leader power are inferred from regime type, executive constraints, personalism, and forced departures. In certain settings, we are able to estimate the impact of an as-if random elongation of tenure. The tests corroborate the thesis: leader tenure is a generalizable metric of leader power.

Virtually every organization is governed by a leader or a small set of leaders. Nation-states are run by heads of state and heads of government. Regional governments are led by governors or premiers, and local governments by mayors or city managers. Political parties are led by party leaders. Voluntary associations have presidents or directors. Criminal syndicates have bosses. Firms are governed by CEOs. And so forth.

How much power do these leaders exercise? Previous studies have attempted to answer this question by focusing on office titles, office locations and sizes, salaries, reports from close observers and experts, and social networks. They have also examined formal institutions such as those that govern the selection and de-selection of leaders and set limits on their actions. All of these approaches to leader power are plausible. However, they are difficult to implement and limited in their range of application.¹

In this study, we explore an alternate measure of leader power: *time in office*. The intuition is that top leaders who are long-serving are likely to be more powerful than those whose tenure is brief. Likewise, organizations where leaders rotate frequently are likely to be characterized by a diffusion of power, while organizations where leaders typically serve lengthy terms power are likely to be more centralized, revolving around the individual at the apex of the hierarchy.

Tenure is not a direct measure of power, and like all proxy measures it is subject to error. However, so long as error is stochastic it offers the promise of an unbiased measure of a quantity of great theoretical and practical interest. Tenure is directly observable, avoiding subjective judgments; data is easily obtained for a wide range of organizations; and the purview of the measure appears to extend across a wide range of leadership positions. As such, tenure may offer

¹We discuss alternative ways to measure power, and their limitations, in Appendix A of the supplementary material.

a unique and relatively unexplored window into the hidden life of organizations—political, civic, or private.

To some, the notion that tenure reflects power may seem axiomatic, and one can find plenty of examples of published work that takes the relationship for granted.² Yet, the conclusion is not self-evident. It could be that tenure is associated with power in the public mind simply because long-serving leaders have had more opportunities to achieve memorable things. It could also be that long tenure results from a leader's responsiveness or their willingness to cede power to others. In these scenarios, tenure and power would be unrelated or even inversely correlated.

Despite its importance, the relationship between tenure and power has never been directly addressed in a wide-ranging fashion. In the first section of the paper, we lay out a rationale for why these two features of leadership might be associated. In the second section, we test the argument empirically with eight studies that explore the issue in different contexts and different research designs. A brief conclusion summarizes the findings and reflects on their implications.

This is a descriptive paper, offering a metric by which to measure a latent concept. As such, we follow in the footsteps of other proxy measurement strategies, e.g., price as a metric of value in efficient markets ([Hayek, 1945](#)), life expectancy as a metric of human development ([Riley, 2001](#)), peaceful post-election transfer of power as a metric of democracy ([Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland, 2010](#)), population density as a metric of economic development in the premodern era ([Hanlon and Hebllich, 2022](#)), night-lights as a metric of economic development in the modern era ([Henderson, Storeygard, and Weil, 2012](#)), trade openness as a metric of globalization ([Gräbner et al., 2021](#)), and tax revenue as a metric of state capacity ([Rogers and Weller, 2014](#)).

²See [Michels \(1915, p. 98\)](#), as well as [Abramson and Rivera \(2016\)](#); [Alexiadou and O'Malley \(2022\)](#); [Bennister, Worthy, and Hart \(2017\)](#); [Bienen and Van de Walle \(1991, 1992\)](#); [Blondel and Thiebault \(2009\)](#); [Hadenius and Teorell \(2007\)](#); [Horiuchi, Laing, and Hart \(2015\)](#); [Ludwig \(2002\)](#); [Theakston \(2013\)](#).

If we are correct in claiming leader tenure as a metric for leader power, this paper offers an important contribution to ongoing work on a variety of topics including leadership ([Day, 2014](#)), organizational theory ([Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2005](#)), and regime-types—where personalistic rule is often regarded as a signal of authoritarianism ([Frantz et al., 2020](#)). By shedding light on the meaning of leader tenure, this paper also sheds light on studies of its causes and effects ([Bienen and Van de Walle, 1991](#); [Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005](#); [Jones and Olken, 2005](#); [Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell, 2022](#); [Simsek, 2007](#)).

1 Rationale

The concept of power is central to our understanding of politics and society, with deep roots in western philosophy and in the history of the social sciences.³ In this study, we bypass many of the conundrums that bedevil scholarly work, e.g., what classes of people hold power at a societal level, whether there are interlocking directorates among these elites, whether those elites circulate, whether they suppress unarticulated views and interests of ordinary citizens, and how power should be defined in the general case.

Our focus is on a relatively narrow topic—the power of a leader over the organization they ostensibly direct. By this, we mean their ability to set policy, control staff, and run day-to-day operations, i.e., *personal* power. A powerful leader is able to make decisions unilaterally; s/he exercises prerogative. Leader power must therefore be distinguished from organizational power:

³Recent treatments and reviews of the literature include [Ledyaev \(1997\)](#); [Morriss \(1987\)](#); [Parietti \(2022\)](#), and, from a psychological angle, [Anderson and Brion \(2014\)](#).

strong organizations may have weak leaders and weak organizations may have strong leaders.⁴

With this understanding, we propose that tenure is a generalizable metric of leader power—applicable across leaders, across organizations, and across contexts (though contingent upon several scope-conditions outlined below). Three assumptions inform this proposition.

1. *Tenure as delegated power.* Initially, leadership is usually delegated.⁵ A set of principals choose a leader and bestow upon him/her a degree of power accompanied by a term in office. The delegation of power and tenure usually go together. If more power is delegated, a longer tenure will be delegated. Tenure is like a leash, and a long leash indicates that the principals are uninterested or incapable of supervising the agent, who is thereby empowered to roam freely. By measuring the length of the leash we are therefore also measuring the extent of the leader's power.

2. *Tenure as a reflection of leader power.* Although tenure may be delegated initially, principals are not always able to maintain control over their agent. This is manifestly the case in circumstances where power is personalized.⁶ In these cases, we expect that tenure serves as a reflection of leader power for the simple reason that strong leaders use their power to retain their hold on office.

⁴For discussion of personal power in political contexts see [Baturo, Anceschi, and Cavatorta \(2024\)](#); [Blondel and Thiebault \(2009\)](#); [Bratton and Van de Walle \(1994\)](#); [Brownlee \(2002\)](#); [Chehabi and Linz \(1998\)](#); [Chiot \(1996\)](#); [Escribà-Folch and Timoneda \(2024\)](#); [Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright \(2024\)](#); [Geddes, Wright, and Frantz \(2018\)](#); [Jackson and Rosberg \(1982\)](#); [Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid \(2019\)](#); [Sahlins \(1963\)](#); [Stein-Hölkeskamp \(2009\)](#); [Sturm and Antonakis \(2015\)](#); [Weyland \(2001\)](#); [Zolberg \(1966\)](#). For discussion of leader power in the context of firms, see [Finkelstein \(1992\)](#); [Ozgen, Mooney, and Zhou \(2025\)](#); [Pfeffer \(1981\)](#). In the context of conceptual work on power, personal power may be understood as the “first face” of power ([Lukes, 1974](#)). For further discussion see Appendix B.

⁵This builds on a view of organizations as coalitions ([Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005](#); [Cyert and March, 1963](#); [Simon and March, 1958](#)) and is a core assumption of selectorate theory ([Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005](#)).

⁶See [Abramson and Rivera \(2016\)](#); [Baturo, Anceschi, and Cavatorta \(2024\)](#); [Blondel and Thiebault \(2009\)](#); [Bratton and Van de Walle \(1994\)](#); [Brownlee \(2002\)](#); [Chehabi and Linz \(1998\)](#); [Chiot \(1996\)](#); [Escribà-Folch and Timoneda \(2024\)](#); [Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright \(2024\)](#); [Geddes, Wright, and Frantz \(2018\)](#); [Jackson and Rosberg \(1982\)](#); [Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid \(2019\)](#); [Sahlins \(1963\)](#); [Stein-Hölkeskamp \(2009\)](#); [Svolik \(2012\)](#); [Weyland \(2001\)](#); [Zolberg \(1966\)](#).

Consider that, by virtue of self-selection, most leaders are extremely ambitious. Once installed in a leadership post they are likely to feel at home, or they quickly become habituated to their position of authority and wish to preserve it ([Ludwig, 2002](#); [Mayhew, 1974](#); [Schlesinger, 1966](#); [Wriggins, 1969](#)). Since occupational pyramids narrow at the top, the higher one rises the fewer attractive alternatives are left to explore. Where does a president go, except into retirement? This is not a happy move for a career-oriented individual. We presume, therefore, that exits from top leadership positions are usually involuntary. When leaders express a desire to retire, to pursue a hobby, or to spend more time with family, it is usually because they have little choice but to move on. If most leaders leave office only when forced to do so, it is reasonable to view their tenure as a signal of how much power they wielded while in office. Weak leaders will be quickly dispatched. Strong leaders will endure because they can.

3. *Tenure as a power tool.* Power arises, in part, from the time-horizons of key actors. If the incumbent looks set to remain in power indefinitely the leader's word is good, which is to say commitments are credible into the future and long-term bargains may be struck ([Baturu, 2014](#)). Everyone knows whom to deal with as all roads lead to the incumbent. If, by contrast, the leader's future tenure is uncertain, or perhaps limited by rules or strictly enforced norms, s/he is in a much weaker position. Key actors can afford to bide their time, knowing that someone else will occupy the corner office in the not-too-distant future. Lamé ducks are lame ([Apollonio and La Raja, 2006](#); [Coppedge, 1994](#); [Pfiffner, 1996](#)). From this perspective, time in power is a crucial ingredient of leader power. The more time a leader anticipates serving in office, the longer his/her time-horizon, the more ambitious s/he can be in establishing an agenda, and the more time s/he will have to see it through.

Likewise, the longer one is in office the more opportunities one has to extend one's prerogatives

and to entrench oneself within an organization. In democratic contexts, this means cultivating key constituencies, distributing patronage, raising a campaign war-chest, and establishing superior name recognition (Erikson, 2016). In autocratic contexts, incumbency effects arise when leaders appoint allies to key posts, eliminate potential challengers, and establish personality cults. Since most leadership settings offer opportunities for the incumbent to entrench him/herself in power, tenure functions as a tool of power aggrandizement.

1.1 Apparent Exceptions

Before moving on, let us explore apparent exceptions to the dictum that leader tenure signals leader power. Consider a setting where the threat of internal oppression posed by the leader is deemed more serious than threats from without. Here, weak leadership may be prized. In this setting, principals may reward feeble leaders with long tenure while cutting short the tenure of assertive leaders. By a similar logic, incumbents may agree to sacrifice personal power for elongated tenure. If so, we should observe a *negative* relationship between power and tenure.

We acknowledge that there may be cases that appear to fit this pattern. However, we will argue that they are extremely uncommon.

The first point is that principals cannot discern, *ex ante*, between compliers and non-compliers as appearances are often deceiving and promises from would-be leaders are not credible and contracts are not enforceable. Plenty of examples can be found of modest candidates being preferred over those with stronger resumes – only to find that, once ensconced, these leaders turn out to be ferocious defenders of their prerogative. The cases of Franco, Stalin, Pinochet, and Xi Jinping all fit this pattern, and so, we suspect, do many others. Where leader power is most feared it is also difficult to constrain.

Next, imagine a scenario in which principals are prescient: they correctly identify a leader with little capacity or lust for power. The question we have to ask ourselves is how long they are likely to survive in office. An incapable leader is likely to be jettisoned quickly if they cannot fulfill the duties of office. A reluctant leader is likely to retire quickly, as they don't want to be there in the first place. Accordingly, we reason that genuinely weak or reluctant leaders do not usually endure.

Now let us entertain a third scenario: a capable leader who does not relish the job but is nonetheless willing to continue, grudgingly. Although this seems like an example of weak leadership it is actually quite the opposite. To the extent that principals are dependent upon a leader to continue in office (perhaps because they have no viable successor) the leader holds an ace. With indispensability comes power. If a leader's threat to walk away puts in jeopardy goals that are dear to the principals they likely to cede considerable prerogative. In this fashion, apparently weak leaders may be quite strong. Their strength consists of their indifference, and hence their willingness to quit.

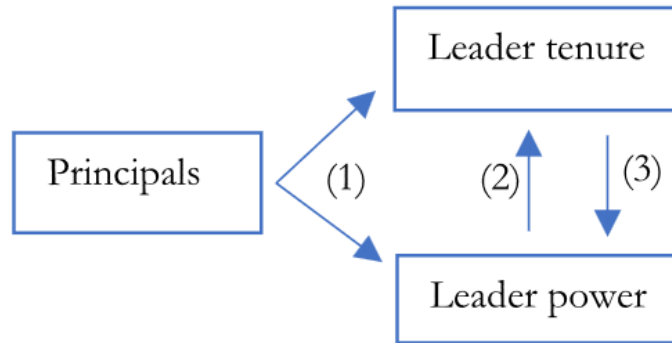
In summary, it is difficult to conjure up a setting in which short tenure is linked systematically (non-stochastically) to weak leadership.

1.2 Summary and scope-conditions

To reprise, we expect a positive association between leader tenure and leader power for three reasons: (1) tenure is a signal of an implicit or explicit delegation of power; (2) tenure is a reflection of leader power; and (3) tenure is a power tool. These relationships are encoded in a simplified causal diagram shown in Figure 1.

Note that leader tenure is the observable metric while leader power is the latent concept of

Figure 1. Ties between Tenure and Power



Note: The theoretical rationales are (1) Tenure as delegated power; (2) Tenure as a reflection of leader power; and (3) Tenure as a power tool.

theoretical interest. We expect tenure to reflect power because they are causally inter-related – power causes tenure and tenure causes power – and because they have a common cause stemming from the principals of the organization, who delegate tenure and power.

Insofar as the arrows in Figure 1 represent the actual data generating process, one may regard tenure as a proxy for power across leaders, across organizations, across organizational types, and across diverse settings. Just as price is regarded as a universal metric of value within an unconstrained market, tenure may be regarded as a universal metric of leader power—with the following important scope-conditions.

First, tenure bears a weaker relationship to power as one moves down the organizational hierarchy. Although secretaries may serve for decades this does not mean they hold positions of power. Their longevity may be rooted in loyalty, expertise, or lack of ambition. Accordingly, tenure is an accurate metric of power for top leaders but not for those at secondary and tertiary tiers of an organization.

Second, tenure bears a different relationship to power as one moves from high-status orga-

nizations (usually larger or wealthier) to lower-status organizations. The boss of a low-status organization, if ambitious, will want to leave for a higher-status organization if the opportunity presents itself. City council members want to be mayors, and mayors want to be governors, and so forth up the hierarchy ([Schlesinger, 1966](#)). If s/he remains it may be a sign of weakness (i.e., incapacity or lack of ambition), rather than strength. Accordingly, tenure is a reliable metric of power for heads of state and CEOs of major corporations and less reliable as a metric for mayors of small cities and heads of small companies.

Third, tenure is related to power so long as an organization enjoys some degree of decision-making autonomy. If it is an appendage of a superordinate body, the leader may have little scope for maneuver. Orders come from above and the titular leader is more functionary than leader. Likewise, s/he has little scope to entrench herself in power. In colonies, agencies, and corporate affiliates we expect to see a weaker relationship between tenure and power.

Fourth, in order for tenure to reflect varying levels of power the tenure of leaders must vary. If all leaders of an organization or an organizational type are compelled to serve fixed terms (without renewal), tenure tells us nothing about who is/was more/less powerful. It does, however, suggest that *all* leaders in that organization are constrained. This means that term-limits are informative with respect to leader power *across organizations*, allowing one to compare leaders that are subject to term limits and those that not.

Finally, as with any measurement instrument for a latent construct, leader tenure is accompanied by stochastic error. There are lots of reasons a leader's tenure may be shortened or elongated, some of which have nothing to do with their personal power. Accordingly, tenure is an imperfect signal of the power of *individual* leaders. We are much more confident in conclusions reached for large samples. In expectation, leader tenure should be indicative of leader power.

2 Validity tests

If our theoretical claim is correct, measures of power should be correlated with the length of time leaders serve in office. This suggests three testable hypotheses. First, long-serving leaders should be more powerful than short-serving leaders occupying the same office. Second, within a single spell a leader's power should increase as their tenure advances.⁷ Finally, in rare cases where tenure is exogenously assigned (e.g., by term limits or close elections) it should have a positive causal effect on leader power.

Only in this final circumstance is it possible to test one of the causal links embedded in Figure 1. The rest of our analyses are correlative, where the choice of whether to place tenure on the right or left side of a regression model is a purely strategic one. Typically, it is on the right side of the model because we want to parse out other potential influences on power that are of no theoretical interest.

Helpfully, leader tenure is fairly easy to measure. The entry and exit of top leaders usually occurs at a discrete point in time and is widely noted in historical sources. To avoid censoring, currently serving leaders are dropped. Cases where leaders without formal title exercise power behind the scenes are also excluded; however, these situations are fairly rare and there is no reason to suppose that their omission exerts a positive bias in the analyses that follow.⁸ We assume that power grows with tenure in a sub-linear fashion, with earlier years mattering more than later years. Accordingly, tenure is transformed by the natural logarithm. (In robustness tests, tenure

⁷Near the end of a term there may be some attenuation of power, either because of visible infirmities or an impending termination date that establishes a lame-duck dynamic. However, since this attenuating effect presumably kicks in at the very end we feel justified in treating the relationship between tenure and power as monotonic.

⁸We surmise that the empirical relationship between leader tenure and leader power would be stronger if powers exercised behind the throne are taken into account, as these shadowy figures tend to endure for long periods of time.

is measured in a linear fashion.)

The main empirical obstacle stems from the fact that power is a capacity. It cannot be directly observed unless it is exercised, and its exercise is not random and therefore hard to interpret. For example, the deployment of force may be viewed as exemplifying a leader's power or weakness (arguably, a truly powerful leader would not need to resort to coercion). Moreover, because leader power refers to a wide range of difficult-to-specify actions and outcomes, it is difficult to operationalize. What does it mean for one leader to be more powerful than another?

Under the circumstances, the best we can do is to enlist a variety of approaches that build on extant work and on widely shared intuitions. This evidence is centered on political leaders holding executive office because these figures are heavily studied and closely observed, allowing for assessments of power that would not be available for minor political offices, heads of companies, or leaders of voluntary associations.

Study 1 draws on extant surveys that identify leaders who are especially capable, powerful, or otherwise outstanding, Study 2 is an original conjoint survey experiment focused on political scientists and intended to elucidate the role of tenure in evaluating leader power. Study 3 enlists LLMs to identify the leaders commonly regarded as the most powerful holders of top offices in countries around the world in the twentieth century. Study 4 looks at term limits as an instrument for the tenure of U.S. governors, whose power is estimated by LLMs. Study 5 uses close gubernatorial elections as a natural experiment in which tenure is assigned in an as-if random fashion to see if longer-serving governors are judged more powerful than short-serving governors (again estimated by LLMs). Study 6 examines the prominence of leaders as reflected by Google search hits. Study 7 looks at various institutional measures of leader constraints including democracy, executive constraints, and personalism. Study 8 focuses on leader exit to see whether

forced departures (presumably, a signal of weakness) decline with tenure.

These studies are presented briefly in the following sections, with additional information and robustness tests consigned to appendices. Results are summarized in a table in the final section of the article.

2.1 Study 1: Expert judgments of historical leaders

A time-honored approach to measuring leader power rests on the judgments of those in a position to know, i.e., experts. In this vein, a genre of academic study asks historians or political scientists to rate or rank political leaders with respect to their greatness, capacity, charisma, or power/influence. Although these concepts seem disparate, we suspect there is a good deal of empirical overlap. Indeed, we show that expert rankings are highly correlated even when the ostensible quality being judged is different.

Recent surveys of this sort focus on heads of government in Australia ([Strangio, 2013, 2022](#)), Canada ([Azzi and Hillmer, 2016, 2021](#); [Ballard and Suedfeld, 1988](#); [Granatstein and Hillmer, 1999](#)), New Zealand ([Sheppard, 1998](#)), the United Kingdom ([Theakston, 2013](#)), and the United States ([Nichols, 2012](#); [Rottinghaus and Vaughn, 2017](#); [Schlesinger, 1997](#)), as well as party leaders in nine European countries ([Alexiadou and O'Malley, 2022](#)). We only include studies with relatively long time-frames, where we can compare multiple leaders of the same office within the same country.

Collating data from these surveys, we construct a comprehensive analysis in which the outcome (greatness/capacity/power) is re-coded into quintiles, with the top quintile indicating the greatest/most capable/most powerful leaders. This ordinal outcome is regressed against a vari-

able measuring the logged tenure of each leader (collected by the authors),⁹ along with fixed effects for each survey and polity, and a time-trend. Standard errors are clustered by survey.

Table 1. Tenure and Expert Judgments

	(1) Compilation	(2) V-Dem
Log Tenure	0.70* (1.81)	0.25*** (4.64)
N leader-spells	552	1,778
N countries	14	151
R^2	0.26	0.08

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: leader's rank quintile in expert judgments.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. Model (1) also includes survey fixed effects. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by survey and country, respectively).

Table 1, Model (1) shows that leaders classified as great, capable, or powerful serve longer than other holders of the same position. Specifically, a change in leadership tenure from 1 to 10 years is associated with an average increase of approximately 1.61 quintiles in the leader power rankings.¹⁰ This confirms our theoretical expectation and corroborates earlier studies with a narrower focus (Alexiadou and O'Malley, 2022; Simonton, 2001).

To complement our ad-hoc collection of expert surveys, we also enlist a global index from V-Dem, which provides for a more comprehensive sample at the cost of a somewhat narrower focus. The index measures the extent to which a country's executive leader is portrayed as

⁹In Appendix C.1 of the supplementary material, we show an alternative specification with untransformed, linear tenure. Direction and magnitude are similar, although the main estimate is not statistically significant at the conventional thresholds.

¹⁰We compute this quantity of interest in studies 1, 3, 4, and 6. To get predicted outcomes, we hold other predictors at their means or modes. Alternatively, we generate "counterfactual" replicate datasets (Arel-Bundock, Greifer, and Heiss, 2024), which we populate with tenure set to either 1 or 10 years, obtaining similar results.

exhibiting extraordinary personal characteristics or leadership skills (Tannenberget al., 2021).¹¹ Results using this index are presented in Model (2) of Table 1.¹² The main estimate is positive and statistically significant, albeit somewhat attenuated compared to that for the compilation of surveys.

We recognize that experts responding to surveys about greatness, capacity, or power may have inferred this ineffable quality from leader tenure, with the assumption that leaders who manage to serve longer terms are also greater, more capable, or more powerful than those who leave quickly. If so, what we have measured is a widely shared intuition among experts about how tenure varies with power—a matter we pursue in an explicit fashion in the next study.

2.2 Study 2: Conjoint experiment among political scientists

To investigate expert intuitions about the relationship of tenure to power in a more explicit fashion, and to isolate the element of theoretical interest from potential confounders, we conduct a conjoint experiment.

The target population consists of political scientists who work in the area of political leadership. A sampling frame is constructed from the Web of Science database,¹³ which allows us to identify authors who have recently published papers focused on heads of state, heads of government, party leaders, governors, or mayors (in any country). From this sampling frame, 1,282 authors are contacted via email, 281 of which (21.92%) completed a short online survey.¹⁴

¹¹The question posed to country experts reads: “To what extent is the Chief Executive portrayed as being endowed with extraordinary personal characteristics and/or leadership skills (e.g. as father or mother of the nation, exceptionally heroic, moral, pious, or wise, or any other extraordinary attribute valued by the society)?” (Coppedge et al., 2025, p. 232).

¹²We merge the V-Dem index into the PLT dataset of leaders, introduced in Section 2.3. We collapse the resulting country-year index to our leader-spell level by taking the average value over the spell.

¹³<https://www.webofscience.com/wos>

¹⁴See Appendix C.2 in the supplementary material for more details on the recruitment process.

At the outset, scholars are asked to identify the country and leadership position with which they are most familiar. Next, we pose the question of theoretical interest:

Among [heads of state/mayors/etc.] in [country], we would like you to consider which of two leaders is more powerful. For each pair of leaders, we will describe their characteristics in a general fashion. Knowing nothing else about them, we ask you to guess which of the leaders is likely to have exercised greater power while in office. To answer this question you can think back to historical examples or you can speculate on the prospects of someone with this set of characteristics if they found themselves in a leadership position.

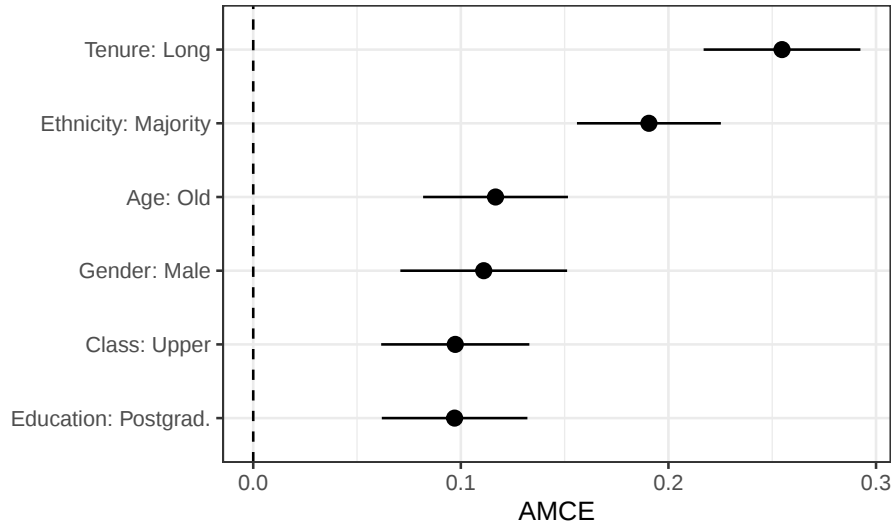
Leader profiles include the following attributes: age (old/young), gender (male/female), ethnicity (majority/minority), education (some college/post-graduate degree), social class (upper/lower), and tenure in office (short/long relative to the norm for that position). Each respondent faces five rounds, with varying treatments.

We preregistered the experimental design and our main hypothesis: that experts will perceive leaders with longer tenures as more powerful compared to those with shorter tenures. ¹⁵

Results from this experiment, displayed in Figure 2, reveal that all factors tested are statistically significant in the expected direction. Experts agree that being male, old, from the majority ethnic group, upper class, well-educated, and long-tenured are signals of political power. However, the best predictor of political power—by far—is the tenure of the officeholder. The estimated effect (AMCE) is twice as large as for age, gender, education, and class, and substantially larger than for ethnicity. On average, respondents are 25.4 percentage points more likely to select a leader as the most powerful when they have a “long” tenure, compared to a “short” tenure. The

¹⁵Anonymized link: https://osf.io/c8xqw/?view_only=c3f5ce040ffa4960b80d726d85aaeff8

Figure 2. Results from conjoint experiment among 281 experts.



intuition that leader tenure measures leader power is apparently widely shared among political scientists.

2.3 Study 3: Reputation

Having looked at expert judgments in Studies 1 and 2, we now turn to a more wide-ranging approach. Political leaders are subject to continual evaluation in published work and in informal venues such as blogs and websites. Some of these evaluations bear on the leader's power. With advances in artificial intelligence, it is possible to summarize these evaluations—which may number in the hundreds or millions—in a systematic fashion by enlisting LLMs.

We initiate this journey using ChatGPT, the advanced large language model developed by OpenAI. In particular, we utilize the GPT-4o model, running our queries in October 2024. Leveraging ChatGPT's API, we set out to rank the power of top political leaders across the world and through history, from the third millennium BCE to the present with data from the Political Leaders through Time (PLT) dataset ([Gerring et al., 2025](#)). To avoid censoring, we drop leaders

whose tenure was incomplete in 2024. The prompt reads as follows:

You are an AI trained to evaluate the power of political leaders. You need to generate a list in comma-separated values (CSV) format without additional text. The list ranks leaders in terms of the power they exercised during their tenure from (country names). The leaders include (list of leaders). They should be listed with their ranking number and the country name. Start with the most powerful leader at rank 1 and continue sequentially.

Following the protocol outlined in Study 1, we convert rank-orders obtained from the LLM into quintiles, with the highest quintile indicating the greatest power. For this reason, the sample only includes polities with at least five leader-spells.

We recognize that there is enormous heterogeneity across polities, not only in the offices and political systems being compared but also in other features that might influence LLM results such as native language, population, educational attainment, economic development, and the composition of the press and scholarly academies (whose words the LLM is charged with analyzing). To neutralize background factors of no theoretical interest, we include polity fixed effects. This restricts comparisons to top leaders of the same polity who served at different points in time.

Another potential bias arises in the form of temporal trends. Conceivably, the data upon which the LLM relies to evaluate leader power treats historical leaders differently from contemporary leaders. We do not know which way this bias might lie, or if it exists at all. But if the bias is consistent and linear across polities it can be mitigated by the inclusion of a time trend.

Table 2 shows the results of our benchmark model. Tenure length is positively correlated with the ranked power of leaders, indicating that longer-serving leaders are (on average) considered

more powerful according to the LLM query results. Although the relationship is weaker than in Study 1—perhaps because of measurement error associated with the LLM methodology—it is still strongly significant and substantively meaningful. As a leader’s tenure increases from 1 to 10 years, their power ranking is predicted to increase by an average of 0.40 quintiles.

We also conduct several robustness checks, including using the linear form of tenure length instead of the logarithmic form and performing subgroup analyses based on time periods and regions. The results, which are consistent with those of the main analysis, are presented in Appendix C.3 of the supplementary material.

Table 2. Tenure and Reputation

	(1)
Log Tenure	0.17*** (21.41)
N leader-spells	49,723
N territories	2,538
R^2	0.59

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: leader’s rank quintile as produced by ChatGPT.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

2.4 Study 4: Term lengths and term limits

The analyses presented so far encompass large sets of—real or hypothetical—leaders, yet are correlational in nature. Now we narrow our focus to settings where leader tenure is exogenously assigned, giving us leverage to estimate its causal effect. We start with term limits.

Extant studies of term lengths and limits generally center on democracy and governance (Cain

and [Levin, 1999](#); [Kousser, 2005](#)). Only a few studies touch on leader power. Consistent with our theory, the imposition of term limits on U.S. state legislatures seems to have weakened the power of majority party leaders, though the estimated effect is not especially strong ([Carey, 1998](#)).

To provide a more thoroughgoing study of this issue focused on prominent leaders, we examine U.S. governors. Helpfully, state governments periodically alter term lengths or term limits for their chief executives. In the late eighteenth century, gubernatorial terms varied between one and three years. Over time, most states adopted four-year terms - the exceptions being Vermont and New Hampshire, which retain two-year terms.

Restrictions on incumbent reelection did not follow a linear progression. Initially, states with shorter terms allowed reelection. However, as term lengths increased, many states abolished reelection opportunities for incumbent governors from the late 18th century. These restrictions were then gradually lifted since the 1950s. Currently, Virginia is the only state that bans incumbent governors from seeking reelection.

These institutional changes in term lengths and limits provide a unique opportunity to explore the impact of tenure on power. To do so, we draw from data on gubernatorial tenure ([Jacob, 2021](#)). Data on term lengths and limits are gathered from state constitutions (posted on Wikipedia). To measure the power of leaders, we ask ChatGPT to rank the power of governors from the same state, mirroring the methodology described for national leaders in the preceding section. (We cannot employ institutional measures of gubernatorial power as these are sticky through time and therefore insensitive to gubernatorial tenure.)

A crucial assumption concerns the assignment of term lengths and limits, which must be exogenous to the outcome. In a few cases, governors have managed to change the rules that govern their own tenure. For example, Louisiana Governor John McKeithen (1964-1972) success-

fully pushed for a constitutional change allowing him to run for another term (which he won). Because we do not know all the circumstances pertaining to rule changes, we exclude governors whose terms encompass rule changes.

Table 3 presents two analyses. In the first, leader power (estimated by the LLM) is regressed against (logged) leader tenure, replicating the format of the analysis in the previous section. In the second, we instrument for leader tenure with two variables—one measuring the length of the term and the other whether the incumbent is eligible for reelection (as per statutory term limits). This second estimate is almost identical to the first, though less precise. The linear regression and instrumental variable analyses suggest that, as a leader’s tenure increases from 1 to 10 years, their power ranking quintile will increase by 1.95 or 1.76, respectively. In Appendix C.4 of the supplementary material, we present alternative specifications using (untransformed) linear tenure, as well as first-stage results.

Table 3. Tenure and Power Instrumented by Term Limits

	(1) LR	(2) IV
Log Tenure	0.85*** (11.79)	0.77* (1.97)
First-stage F statistic		35.97
N governor-spells	2,194	2,194
N territories	50	50
R^2	0.31	0.31

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: estimated power of U.S. state governors, classified by rank quintile and estimated by ChatGPT.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

2.5 Study 5: Close elections

Another setting where leader tenure is exogenously assigned occurs in closely contested elections, where the result may be considered as-if random ([De la Cuesta and Imai, 2016](#)). Specifically, when an incumbent loses by a narrow margin, their tenure is abruptly cut short. Conversely, when an incumbent narrowly wins, their tenure is extended arbitrarily. (A similar methodology has been used to study political dynasties in the U.S. congress ([Dal Bó, Dal Bó, and Snyder, 2009](#)).)

Employing this regression discontinuity design (RDD) methodology, studies have shown that incumbents enjoy an advantage vis-a-vis challengers in a variety of U.S. elections. According to a recent review ([Zoorob, 2022](#), p. 7), incumbency effects are estimated to be 30 points for state representatives ([Uppal, 2009](#)), 32 points for city councilors ([Trounstein, 2011](#)), 33 points for partisan mayors ([Ferreira and Gyourko, 2009](#)), 37 points for all mayors ([de Benedictis-Kessner, 2018](#)), 43 points for US sheriffs ([Zoorob, 2022](#)), and 45 points for federal representatives ([Lee, 2008](#)). We regard these studies as fodder for our argument, even though the outcome—understood as votes or reelection probabilities—does not directly measure political power.

To access political power, we draw again upon LLM estimates of the political power of U.S. governors, following the methodology laid out in Study 4. Data on election results are drawn from [Erikson, Folke, and Snyder Jr \(2015\)](#), which includes information on all gubernatorial elections from 1880 to 2020. This sample is refined to include only incumbents who narrowly won or lost reelection, with the assumption that those who won were arbitrarily granted additional years in office.

We estimate the impact of an additional term on the power of governors with a fuzzy regression discontinuity design. Substantively, this approach is equivalent to an instrumental variable

strategy, where a governor's tenure is instrumented by winning a close election. For the estimation, we use the non-parametric approach developed by (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik, 2014).

Table 4 shows four analyses with different bandwidths, corresponding to winning margins.¹⁶ We also control for a linear time trend. Estimates are fairly stable across all four analyses—although the main estimate in model (4), with the smallest sample size, is not statistically significant at the usual thresholds. In general, tenure length is positively correlated with the power rank provided by the LLM: receiving a tenure extension (after winning a close election) is associated with an average increase of more than one quintile of power assessment in all models.

Table 4. Tenure and Close Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Log Tenure	1.33*** (2.74)	1.14** (1.98)	1.25** (2.42)	1.12 (1.31)
Bandwidth	0.10	0.07	0.05	0.03
N governor-spells	407	299	228	146

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: governor's rank quintile as produced by ChatGPT.

Models include entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis.

2.6 Study 6: Prominence

A sixth way to judge power is by a leader's public imprint on the world. Powerful leaders presumably generate more press, more debate, more support and opposition. Their prominence might even endure into posterity, long after leaving office. All of this interest should be registered both on the print record and the worldwide web.

¹⁶These models employ a rectangular RDD kernel. In Appendix C.5 we instead use a triangular kernel, obtaining similar results.

In order to quantify prominence, we present two complementary approaches that draw from Google data. First, we use Google Ngram, which records the mentions of leaders in books and other print publications. The data comes from [Jiang, Xi, and Xie \(2020\)](#) [JXX], who develop a power index of autocratic leaders based on the ratio between the number of publications that mention a top political leader's name and the number of publications that mention other influential (living) political figures from the same country and year. Coverage spans the 1950–2019 period and includes more than 1,400 unique autocratic leaders from 160+ countries. For consistency with our previous analyses, we divide this Ngram-derived measure of power into quintiles within each country.

Second, we use plain Google Search, which tracks the state of the internet. In particular, we count the number of Google hits for each leader, alongside keywords for their leadership position and country (for example, we use the query *Nestor Kirchner Argentina president*). We again use the comprehensive dataset of leaders from the PLT, with a sample including 75,450 leader-spells from 4,078 territories starting in the third millennium BCE. Following our convention, we divide the variable into quintiles within each territory (as in Study 3, we only include territories with at least five leader-spells for this reason).

Results from models predicting prominence using tenure are in [Table 5](#). As usual, we employ logged tenure as the independent variable and time trends. (See [Appendix C.6](#) in the supplementary material for alternative specifications with untransformed tenure.) We also include country fixed effects for the JXX analysis and polity-office fixed effects for the second analysis. A leader's tenure displays a strong positive association with their prominence, both in the written record and the worldwide web. For JXX's NGram data, an increase of tenure from 1 to 10 years is associated with an average increase of 1.20 quintiles in leader power. Meanwhile, the relation-

ship is much attenuated using mere Google Search, suggesting a noisier measure—here the same change in tenure years is associated with an average increase of 0.14 quintiles in leader power as measured by Google hits. Note that this estimate is higher for the post-War era (as shown in Model 3)—with our quantity of interest raising to 0.46—possibly reflecting the recency bias of internet data.

Table 5. Tenure and Prominence

	(1) Ngram, JXX	(2) Search, PLT	(3) Search, PLT 1945-
Log Tenure	0.52*** (10.37)	0.06*** (6.94)	0.20*** (6.55)
N leader-spells	1,485	77,135	8,690
N territories	166	5,763	1,472
R^2	0.13	0.06	0.24

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: leader's rank quintile, derived from Google data.

Models include country(-office) fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

An analysis of this sort is noisy insofar as lots of things other than tenure influence the amount of attention a leader receives in publicly recorded sources preserved in books and on the worldwide web. However, most of these background factors can be regarded as stochastic relative to the factor of theoretical interest, political power. We assume, for example, that powerful leaders are not more subject to scandals or other forms of notoriety that might attract attention but are not a product of power.

Powerful leaders are presumably capable of making their mark on society in many ways, some of which fall outside their duties (and perhaps their tenure) as leader of an organization specified in our dataset. They might write a notable book, lead a social movement, or become a public

intellectual. Insofar as these achievements measure their intrinsic talents and charisma, we can expect that it also assisted their ability to wield power within the specified organization. Again, prominence seems to be a plausible measure of power, even if some of that prominence arises from extracurricular activities.

2.7 Study 7: Constraint

A key element of leader power is the absence of institutional constraints, which we understand as a leader's ability to exercise prerogative. If tenure is a proxy for power, we should observe a negative relationship between leader tenure and constraints on leader prerogatives.

Constraints may be variously measured. One approach arises from a polity's regime type. In a democracy, leaders are usually constrained, e.g., by a constitution (rule of law), by vertical accountability (mass electorates), and/or by horizontal accountability (elites and institutions with a degree of autonomy). Whatever the mechanism, leaders of authoritarian states should have greater leeway than leaders of democratic states ([Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005](#); [Jones and Olken, 2005](#)). The absence or weakness of constraints should, in turn, enable authoritarian leaders to cling to power, enhancing their tenure in office.

To test the proposition that democracy is associated with reduced leader tenure we enlist a widely used index of democracy, the Electoral democracy index (Polyarchy) ([Teorell et al., 2018](#)) from the Varieties of Democracy project.

Closely related to democracy is the existence of executive constraints, limiting the exercise of executive power. A commonly used measure is the XCONST index produced by the Polity project ([Marshall, 2021](#)).

A third outcome of interest is more narrowly tailored. This is the degree of *personalism*

associated with an authoritarian regime, which we interpret as lack of constraint. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz ([Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018](#), pp. 79-80) generate an index composed of eight indicators: personal control of the security apparatus, loyalist paramilitary forces, control of the composition of the party executive committee, a party executive committee that behaves as a rubber stamp, control over appointments, creation of a new pro-regime party, control of military promotions, and officer purges.¹⁷

These three outcomes are regressed against tenure along with polity fixed effects and a time trend. Results displayed in Table 6 confirm expectations. Long-serving leaders are associated with less democracy, fewer executive constraints, and more personalism. According to our models, a change of tenure from 1 to 10 years is associated with an average change of -0.05 in polyarchy (-0.20 SD), of -1.10 in executive constraints (-0.47 SD), and of 0.14 in personalism ($+0.50$ SD). In Appendix C.7 of the supplementary material we test an alternative specification with a linear (rather than logged) measure of tenure, which exhibits similar results.

Table 6. Tenure and Leader Constraints

	(1) Polyarchy	(2) Exec. Constraints	(3) Personalism
Log Tenure	-0.02^{***} (-3.95)	-0.48^{***} (-6.30)	0.06^{***} (3.55)
N leader-spells	13,623	9,436	2,714
N countries	181	143	103
R^2	0.72	0.65	0.60

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Models include country fixed effects and time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

¹⁷The authors show that more personalist periods of rule are associated with longer-serving leaders, an effect that is especially strong for founding leaders and for factionalized seizure groups ([Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018](#), p. 88, 91).

2.8 Study 8: Exit

A final clue to the relationship between tenure and power comes with a leader's departure from office. Insofar as tenure is a signal of power, short-serving leaders ought to be more susceptible to involuntary departure while long-serving leaders should be able to choose the timing and circumstance of their departure.

This issue has been explored by several previous studies. Among Roman emperors, [Saleh \(2019\)](#) finds that the probability of meeting a violent end decreases initially, stabilizes around year eight, and then increases again at year twelve. In a sample of African leaders observed in the postwar era, Henry Bienen and Nic van de Walle ([Bienen and Van de Walle, 1991, 1992](#)) find that the probability of a forced exit (often violent) declines monotonically with a leader's tenure in office. In a study of autocracies in the postwar era, [Svolik \(2012\)](#) finds that the probability of a dictator's removal by rebellion among his/her support coalition declines with tenure.

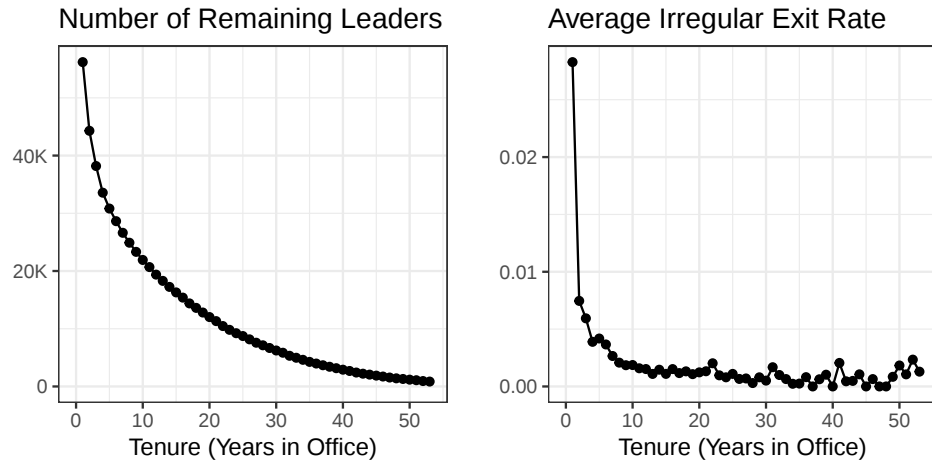
Our analysis enlists a much larger sample composed of all heads of state and heads of government of sovereign and semi-sovereign states from 2643 B.C. to the present. Irregular departures (regarded as a signal of leader weakness) include deposition by domestic actors, assassination or forced suicide, and death in civil war.

Figure 3 shows the average rate of irregular exit across years in office for all leaders in the dataset.¹⁸ A substantial decrease in the rate of irregular exits can be seen in the first decade of office, which flattens out in later years.

To further interrogate this data, we estimate a Cox Proportional Hazards (CPH) model, which predicts the time left until an irregular exit. In this specification, the unit of analysis is the leader-

¹⁸To ease visualization, the x-axis is trimmed at 53 years of tenure (99% of the sample).

Figure 3. Distribution of irregular exits over time



spell. Calendar year is the time unit, and tenure (number of years since taking office, logged) is the predictor of interest. The model includes region fixed effects and leader-clustered standard errors.

Table 7. Tenure and Irregular Exits

	(1)
Log Tenure	-1.47*** (-27.01)
N leader-spell-years	603,671
N irregular exits	2,856
R^2	0.01
Max. Possible R^2	0.05

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Models include region FEs and entry-year time trends. z-values are in parenthesis (from leader-clustered SEs).

Model results are in Table 7. They show a statistically significant and negative relationship

between tenure and irregular exit, i.e., longer tenures are associated with lower risk of irregular exit. Returning to our usual quantity of interest, an increase of tenure from 1 to 10 years is associated with a 96.55 percent decrease (or a decrease of 3.69 percentage points) in the probability of irregular exit, holding all else constant. In Appendix C.8 of the supplementary material we present alternative specifications with untransformed (linear) tenure, controls, and trimmed samples.

3 Conclusion

Virtually all organizations—governmental, civic, or private—have leaders. How much power they exercise is critical to understanding organizational behavior. Although there are quite a number of ways one might operationalize the concept of leader power (see Appendix A), we argue that time in office is the most accessible and broadly applicable indicator. It also happens to be directly observable and therefore avoids potential biases introduced by subjective measures.

Several scope-conditions accompany this proposition, as discussed. First, tenure bears a weaker relationship to power as one moves down the organizational hierarchy. Second, tenure bears a weaker relationship to power as one moves from high-status to low-status organizations. Third, tenure is related to power so long as an organization enjoys some degree of decisionmaking autonomy.

As is the case for all latent concepts, a certain amount of measurement error is to be expected. Here measurement error arises when factors other than power influence a leader's tenure—some leaders are more (or less) powerful than their tenure suggests. However, so long as these errors are stochastic we can regard leader tenure as an unbiased measure of leader power. And so long as samples are large we can regard estimates as reasonably precise.

With these caveats and clarifications, we have proposed that leader tenure is a generalizable metric of leader power. Evidence for this proposition is adduced from eight studies, whose key features are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8. Summary of studies

	Leaders	Assessment of power	Finding
1	Top leaders across the world (N=1,778 leader-spells)	Experts assess the greatness, capacity or power of historical leaders	Tenure predicts power
2	Heads of state/government, party leaders, governors, mayors	Experts, presented with hypothetical vignettes, identify the most powerful leaders in forced-choice experiments	Of all leader characteristics, tenure is the strongest predictor of power
3	Top leaders in PLT dataset (N=49,723 leader-spells)	LLM query	Tenure predicts power
4	U.S. governors (N=2,194 governor-spells)	LLM query	Tenure, instrumented by term limits, predicts power
5	U.S. governors (N=407 governor-spells)	LLM query	Tenure, instrumented by close elections, predicts power
6	Top leaders in PLT dataset (N=77,135 leader-spells)	Google search hits	Tenure predicts power
7	Top leaders in PLT dataset (N=13,623 leader-spells)	Democracy, executive constraints, personalism	Tenure predicts reduced constraints
8	Top leaders in PLT dataset (N=603,671 leader-spell-years)	Forced departure from office	Tenure predicts fewer forced departures

Note: When a study uses multiple data sources, we report the one with the largest number of observations.

The gist of these studies is to associate leader tenure with some existing measure that is widely regarded as reflecting leader power. Our evidence spans subjective assessments of power (from experts, LLM queries, and Google search hits) as well as institutional limits on power (from regime type, executive constraints, personalism, and forced departures). In a few settings, we can estimate the impact of an as-if random elongation of tenure on leader power. All of these analyses corroborate our hypothesis that leader tenure is a strong indicator of leader power.

Since many of our empirical exercises center on heads of state and government it is natural to wonder whether the relationship between tenure and power varies across regime-types. To

gauge this ancillary question, we subset analyses by regime-type (following [Boix, Miller, and Rosato, 2013](#)) in studies 1-3 and 6. This subgroup exploration is documented in Appendix D in the supplementary material. Remarkably, we find no statistically significant difference across democracies and autocracies. Democracies constrain leaders, as shown in Study 7; but regime-type is apparently not a moderator of the tenure/power relationship.

Readers should bear in mind that our focus on politics is a matter of expedience. Political leaders are more closely observed than leaders of civic associations or private firms offering a number of options for measuring power. However, we see no reason to suppose that tenure is less viable as a metric of leader power in non-political settings, subject to the scope-conditions noted above.

To the extent that leader tenure serves as an effective indicator of leader power, we may be able to enlist this instrument to address a range of questions that would otherwise be difficult to assess. Which leaders are most powerful? Which organizations are most leader-centered? Which organizations diffuse decisionmaking power widely? How do decisionmaking structures evolve over the lifetime of organizations? What factors affect the power of leaders? What impact does leader power have on the quality of decisions and the success of organizations?

We do not wish to imply that these questions are easy to answer. The point is, they are rendered more tractable by the existence of a readily observable and readily available indicator of leader power. Just as indices of democracy, state capacity, and ideology have advanced the study of these subjects, we anticipate that our proposed metric will advance the study of leader power.

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Supplementary Material - Online Appendix

Leader Tenure and Leader Power

Table of Contents

A	Alternate Measures of Leader Power	A-2
B	Defining Leader Power	A-4
B.1	Counterfactual thought-experiments	A-4
C	Validity Tests: Extensions	A-5
C.1	Expert judgments (Study 1)	A-5
C.2	Conjoint experiment among political scientists (Study 2)	A-5
C.3	Reputation (Study 3)	A-6
C.4	Term lengths and term limits (Study 4)	A-7
C.5	Close elections (Study 5)	A-8
C.6	Prominence (Study 6)	A-8
C.7	Constraint (Study 7)	A-9
C.8	Exit (Study 8)	A-9
D	Validity Tests: Subgroup Analyses by Regime Type	A-11
D.1	Expert judgments (Study 1)	A-11
D.2	Conjoint experiment among political scientists (Study 2)	A-11
D.3	Reputation (Study 3)	A-12
D.4	Prominence (Study 6)	A-12
	References (Supplementary Material)	A-13

A Alternate Measures of Leader Power

In the body of the paper we present an approach to measuring leader power based on the tenure of leaders. In this appendix, we discuss several alternatives.¹

One approach rests on visible manifestations of power such as formal position ("structural" power), office location or size, and other perquisites.² Titles are evidently helpful in evaluating *de jure* power, and they are essential for identifying who the top dog is.

However, formal titles don't shed light on how much *de facto* power the top dog has relative to others in the organization. Some presidents have a great deal more power than others. Moreover, the same title may mean very different things in different contexts. A president of a country is in a very different position than a president of a company or voluntary association. We conclude that titles tell us who exercises power but not how much power they exercise.

Salary is a more sensitive tool and also, arguably, equivalent across contexts (Whisler et al., 1967). *Ceteris paribus*, it seems reasonable to regard salary as an indicator of power.

However, the highest paid individuals are not always the most powerful. Although the coach of a college football team is often paid more than the college president this does not mean that s/he wields greater power over university policy (outside the athletic program). One's value to an organization may arise from expertise or skill rather than decision-making; hence, money does not always equal power. Moreover, official salaries sometimes represent a small portion of a leader's total remuneration in stock, consulting, and future (expected) earnings, introducing a non-trivial source of measurement error. In any case, information on (official) salary is rarely available and thus of limited utility as a measurement instrument.

A third approach is to ask people within an organization, or those who might be regarded as expert observers, to assess the power of those at the top.³ Reputational (or perceptual) assessments of power are surely informative. Participants and observers are in a good position to know where power lies.

At the same time, one may wonder whether those within an organization are truly capable of judging the ineffable quality of power. Survey responses may reflect preconceptions or formal roles rather than underlying realities. They may also reflect what they think what respondents view as the socially acceptable view (how an organization, or a leader, presents themselves). Indeed, responses from those within the same organization often reveal divergences with respect to the perceived power of leaders (Atwater and Yammarino, 1996). In any case, this approach to measurement is time-consuming, expensive, impossible to deploy historically, and hence of limited utility as a generalized metric.

A fourth approach is to map the social network of an organization. The operating hypothesis is that those at the center of a network possess greater influence, perhaps by virtue of their access to information or perhaps by virtue of their greater number of contacts.⁴

This approach is also informative. However, it risks confusing popularity with power. Decisions

¹For general discussion see Finkelstein (1992); Pfeffer (1981, 1992); Whisler et al. (1967, ch. 2).

²See Tushman and Romanelli (1983); Whisler et al. (1967).

³See Baturo and Elkind (2014); Blau (1979); Hambrick (1981); Hinings et al. (1974); Hunter (1953); Marino, Martocchia Diodati, and Verzichelli (2022); O'Malley (2007); Perrow (1970); Pfeffer and Salancik (1974); Rahim (1988).

⁴See Bonacich (1987); Brass (1984); Brass and Burkhardt (1993); Brass and Krackhardt (2012); Puffer and Weintrop (1991, ch 6).

are made in boardrooms not around water coolers. Moreover, power in many organizations is rigidly hierarchical; in these settings the most influential power-holders may be the most aloof. In any case, constructing a network analysis, even in a partial fashion, is an excruciating process for a single organization, and there are many ways to model network relationships in order capture the ineffable quantity of power. It is hard to imagine extending this methodology across many organizations, much less to previous historical eras.

A final approach centers on the formal institutions that structure leadership within an organization. Presumably, where selection procedures are democratic, where rules forbid the unilateral exercise of power, where oversight mechanisms exist, and where checks and balances are in place, there is a flatter hierarchy.

Unfortunately, formal rules do not exist in many organizations. Where they exist, they are not always publicly available, well-preserved, and hence accessible. And where they are obtainable one must consider whether they were/are effective in constraining the leader. De jure rules do not always translate into de facto practices.⁵ These sorts of difficulties are apparent in political scientists' quest to measure democracy, which is difficult even for nation-states, the most prominent and well-studied organizations in the world ([Coppedge et al., 2020](#); [Munck, 2009](#)). Imagine if we tried to arrive at an institutional measure of leader power across local governments, firms, voluntary associations, agencies, football clubs, and various and sundry organizations. Even if the relevant information was available it would be challenging to measure power in a meaningful way across such diverse contexts.

To be clear, each of the foregoing approaches has considerable merit. (Indeed, we make use of some of them to validate our own approach in the paper) However, none hold much promise as a universal metric of leader power.

⁵[Duverger \(1954, book 1, ch. 3\)](#) offers a catalog of examples showing how European party elites manipulated their party's electoral systems to maintain power. He concludes (*Ibid.* 146), "The total effect of these electoral tricks is to hide a greater or less degree of autocracy in appointments under a more or less democratic mask."

B Defining Leader Power

In common parlance, to say that someone has power implies that they have the ability to effect change. As such, it has causal implications.⁶ However, these implications are not entirely straightforward. The statement “*A* is powerful” articulates an expectation that *A* can affect outcomes within the purview of *A*’s dominion. This is vague in several respects.

As a potentiality, power invokes actions that may, or may not, come to pass. A leader might choose not to invoke his or her power, but this does not mean s/he no longer possesses it. Power may also be exerted without any explicit action on the leader’s part. Subordinates, anticipating what the leader might want or do, may act accordingly. As such, power is often unobservable.

Second, statements about leader power implicitly invoke a wide array of treatments and outcomes. When we say that someone is powerful we are implying that they can, by their (unspecified) actions, affect a broad set of (unspecified) outcomes. Actions taken by the leader, and outcomes affected by the leader, are so numerous and varied that it may be difficult even to imagine what they are, much less to test all of them.

Because of these ambiguities, even those armed with a narrow “behavioralist” definition of power find it difficult to formulate falsifiable propositions. This may explain why the concept of power has receded from social science in recent years, spurred by the causal identification revolution.

And yet, it is impossible to conceptualize important theoretical questions—e.g., about politics, democracy, accountability, corruption, inequality, leadership, institutions, or ideology—without invoking the concept of power. One may sidestep the matter by substituting near-synonyms (*authority, coercion, compliance, control, dominance, force, influence, rule*, et al.). However, the methodological difficulties encountered by power cannot be defined out of existence.

Consider a stylized fact: some people have the ability to affect many outcomes of importance to us. The actions of others have very little impact. The concept of power is indispensable if we wish to talk about such matters. In this light, it may be justifiable to sacrifice precision for greater generality. Theorizing on a large scale requires capacious concepts whose abstraction allows them to encompass a great many phenomena. *Power* is one such example.⁷

B.1 Counterfactual thought-experiments

To bring greater clarity to the concept of leader power we offer two counterfactual thought-experiments.

In the first scenario, a contentious issue divides an organization. Everyone has a position, *pro* or *con*. The organization’s official position is articulated in a document (a position-paper, report, statute, or contract) that is open to revision. Now, let us imagine that a member of the organization changes sides—from *pro* to *con* or vice-versa. That is the intervention of interest.

If the individual is weak (they have little power), we suppose that his/her change of position has little or no effect on the organization’s official stance. If, on the other hand, they are

⁶Connecting power with causation has a long history extending back to Hobbes, though there are a variety of interpretations. See, e.g., [Ledyaev \(1997\)](#); [Dahl \(1957\)](#); [Nagel \(1972\)](#); [Riker \(1964\)](#); [Simon \(1953\)](#). [Parietti \(2022, ch. 3\)](#) is dubious, emphasizing differences between power and causation.

⁷[Dahl \(1957, 201\)](#) comments: “That some people have more power than others is one of the most palpable facts of human existence. Because of this, the concept of power is as ancient and ubiquitous as any that social theory can boast.”

strong, we suppose that their change of position has a substantial impact. That impact might be registered directly upon the document that articulates the organization's position. Or, it might be registered indirectly, by affecting the views of others and subsequently the organization's official position. In any case, the imagined intervention measures what we wish to measure—that individual's policymaking power within the organization. Those with greater power will have greater influence over the organization's policies.⁸

Admittedly, this is a complex scenario, and difficult to play out in practice (though experimental formats are possible, in principle). Let us consider a simpler scenario.

Here, the counterfactual is the presence/absence of a leader rather than his/her change of position. Suppose the incumbent dies suddenly. If the deceased leader occupied a critical position within the organization his/her departure should result in a considerable shake-up. Things will be done differently, or at least there will be some turbulence during the transition to a new leader. By contrast, a leader with little influence will scarcely be missed. This is the scenario adopted by a series of natural experiments on leadership power (Jones and Olken, 2005).

We conclude that although the concept of leader power is difficult to define and measure, it is not entirely recalcitrant. In this section, we have considered ways in which leader power can be conceptualized as a causal relationship, and ways in which causal hypotheses can be subjected to experimental or quasi-experimental designs. This is helpful as a matter of clarification even if it does not translate into a tractable research design that addresses our questions of theoretical interest.

C Validity Tests: Extensions

C.1 Expert judgments (Study 1)

Table C1. Tenure and Expert Judgments

	(1) Compilation	(2) V-Dem
Tenure	0.10 (1.12)	0.03*** (4.15)
N leader-spells	555	1778
N countries	14	151
R^2	0.22	0.08

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: leader's rank quintile in expert judgments.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. Model (1) also includes survey fixed effects. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by survey and country, respectively).

C.2 Conjoint experiment among political scientists (Study 2)

To identify the pool of leadership scholars, we ran the following search query on Web of Science:⁹

⁸This approach is in the spirit of Dahl (1957, 1961), who studied decisionmaking in a political context. See also Mintzberg (1983); Patchen (1974).

⁹<https://www.webofscience.com/wos>

(TI=(president) OR TI=("prime minister") OR TI=(monarch*) OR TI=(autocrat*) OR TI=(dictator) OR TI=("party leader") OR TI=(governor) OR TI=(premier) OR TI=(mayor*) OR TI=("local officials") OR TI=("local cadres") OR AK=(president) OR AK=("prime minister") OR AK=(monarch*) OR AK=(autocrat*) OR AK=(dictator) OR AK=("party leader") OR AK=(governor) OR AK=(premier) OR AK=(mayor*) OR AK=("local officials") OR AK=("local cadres")) AND WC=(Political Science) AND PY=(2017-2024)

To recruit participants, we sent this e-mail to 1,282 authors matching the search query:

Dear Professor,

I am conducting a survey of leadership and power. Specifically, what leader attributes might offer clues to the power a leader wields?

To this end, I am seeking the expert opinions of political scientists.

This short, anonymous survey will take no more than five minutes of your time and will contribute to our knowledge of an important and under-researched area of political science.

I know you are busy and would greatly appreciate your participation. To do so, please click on this link: [survey link]

Many thanks!

[signature]

C.3 Reputation (Study 3)

Table C2. Tenure and Reputation with Linear Form of Tenure Length

	(1)
Tenure Length	0.0005*** (7.2764)
N leader-spells	50,038
N territories	2,637
R^2	0.5748

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: leader's rank quintile as produced by ChatGPT.

Models include entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

Table C3. Tenure and Reputation by Regions

	(1) Europe	(2) Americas	(3) MENA	(4) SS Africa	(5) Asia
Log Tenure	0.20*** (18.51)	0.50*** (9.02)	0.18*** (5.39)	0.11*** (5.87)	0.16*** (13.58)
N leader-spells	23,873	2,047	4,128	5,329	13,951
N territories	1,033	73	194	376	820
R^2	0.61	0.45	0.56	0.53	0.56

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: estimated power of leaders, classified by rank quintile and estimated by ChatGPT.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

Table C4. Tenure and Reputation by Time

	(1) Before 1400	(2) 1400 - 1800	(3) 1800 - 1945	(4) Post 1945
Log Tenure	0.17*** (13.03)	0.19*** (19.72)	0.18*** (14.68)	0.26*** (10.60)
N leader-spells	13,022	15,254	11,651	5,080
N territories	733	1,132	954	309
R^2	0.58	0.70	0.76	0.61

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: estimated power of leaders, classified by rank quintile and estimated by ChatGPT.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

C.4 Term lengths and term limits (Study 4)

Table C5. Tenure and Power Instrumented by Term Limits

	(1) LR	(2) IV
Linear Tenure Length	0.07** (2.23)	0.09* (1.94)
First-stage F statistic		41.70
N governor-spells	2194	2194
N states	50	50
R^2	0.26	0.25

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: estimated power of U.S. state governors, classified by rank quintile and estimated by ChatGPT.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

Table C6. First Stage Results of IV Estimate

	(1) Log Form Tenure	(2) Linear Form Tenure
Term Limit	0.16*** (4.73)	1.30*** (3.53)
Reelection	0.18*** (3.63)	1.63*** (4.38)
N governor-spells	2194	2194
N states	50	50
R^2	0.19	0.11

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: estimated power of U.S. state governors, classified by rank quintile and estimated by ChatGPT. Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

C.5 Close elections (Study 5)

Table C7. Tenure and Close Elections, Triangular Kernel RDD

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Log Tenure	1.25** (2.45)	1.30** (2.33)	1.32** (2.16)	1.17 (1.37)
Bandwidth	0.10	0.07	0.05	0.04
N governor-spells	407	299	228	174

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: governor's rank quintile as produced by ChatGPT.

Models include entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis.

C.6 Prominence (Study 6)

Table C8. Tenure and Prominence, models with untransformed tenure

	(1) Ngram, JXX	(2) Search, PLT	(3) Search, PLT 1945-
Tenure	0.06*** (9.07)	0.00*** (7.67)	0.02*** (5.77)
N leader-spells	1,485	77,135	8,690
N territories	166	1,854	553
R^2	0.11	0.02	0.13

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: leader's rank quintile, derived from Google data.

Models include country(-office) fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

C.7 Constraint (Study 7)

Table C9. Tenure and Leader Constraints

	(1) Polyarchy	(2) Exec. Constraints	(3) Personalism
Tenure	−0.00*** (−4.18)	−0.03*** (−3.36)	0.00* (1.91)
N leader-spells	13,623	9,436	2,714
N countries	181	143	103
R^2	0.72	0.64	0.59

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Models include country fixed effects and time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

Table C10. Tenure and Leader Constraints

	(1) Polyarchy	(2) Exec. Constraints	(3) Personalism
Log Tenure	−0.00 (−0.51)	−0.32** (−2.16)	−0.04 (−0.55)
N leader-spells	13,623	9,436	2,714
N countries	181	143	103
N leaders	2337	1681	432
R^2	0.97	0.93	0.84

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Models include country and leader fixed effects and time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

C.8 Exit (Study 8)

Table C11. Tenure and Irregular Exits, Linear Specification

	(1)
Tenure	−0.18*** (−4.63)
N leader-spell-years	603,645
N irregular exits	2,856
R^2	0.01
Max. Possible R^2	0.05

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Models include region FEs and entry-year time trends. z-values are in parenthesis (from leader-clustered SEs).

Table C12. Tenure and Irregular Exits, Additional controls

	(1)
Log Tenure	−0.90*** (−4.38)
Controls (age, polyarchy)	×
N leader-spell-years	105, 150
N irregular exits	1, 627
R^2	0.01
Max. Possible R^2	0.11

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Models include region FEs and entry-year time trends. z-values are in parenthesis (from leader-clustered SEs).

Table C13. Tenure and Irregular Exits, Samples Trimmed with Tenure above 1, 2, or 3 years

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Log Tenure	−1.44*** (−19.60)	−1.46*** (−10.97)	−1.51*** (−19.74)
N leader-spell-years	603, 044	594, 342	585, 076
N irregular exits	2, 721	2, 384	2, 146
R^2	0.01	0.01	0.01
Max. Possible R^2	0.05	0.04	0.04

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Models include region FEs and entry-year time trends. z-values are in parenthesis (from leader-clustered SEs).

Table C14. Tenure and Irregular Exits, Samples Trimmed with Tenure below 50, 60, or 70 years

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Log Tenure	−1.48*** (−38.02)	−1.48*** (−19.82)	−1.47*** (−12.20)
N leader-spell-years	528, 949	574, 444	594, 265
N irregular exits	2, 838	2, 846	2, 856
R^2	0.01	0.01	0.01
Max. Possible R^2	0.06	0.05	0.05

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Models include region FEs and entry-year time trends. z-values are in parenthesis (from leader-clustered SEs).

D Validity Tests: Subgroup Analyses by Regime Type

Our theoretical expectations about the relationship between leader power and leader tenure, outlined in Section 1, is agnostic to regime type. However, one might wonder whether this core feature of politics moderates the relationship of interest. To test the question empirically we subset the relevant validity tests from Section 2 by regime-type, following classifications from Boix, Miller, and Rosato (2013).

D.1 Expert judgments (Study 1)

Table D1. Tenure and Expert Judgments

	(1) Democracies	(2) Autocracies
Log Tenure	0.27*** (3.29)	0.27*** (4.71)
N leader-spells	625	931
N countries	77	104
R^2	0.38	0.18

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

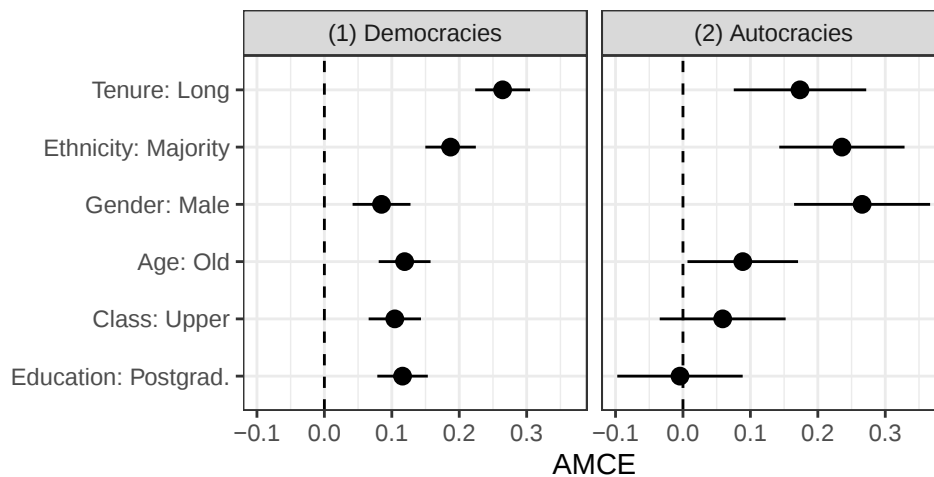
Outcome: leader's rank quintile in expert judgments.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

D.2 Conjoint experiment among political scientists (Study 2)

Unlike our main analysis of the experiment, this subgroup exploration was not preregistered.

Figure D1. Results from conjoint experiment among political scientists, divided by the regime type of their country of expertise.



Note: Results for democracies (1) from 3,290 unique responses and 235 experts. Results for autocracies (2) from 602 unique responses and 43 experts.

D.3 Reputation (Study 3)

Table D2. Tenure and Reputation, by Regime Type

	(1) Democracies	(2) Autocracies
Log Tenure	0.33*** (5.37)	0.35*** (10.20)
N leader-spells	1,267	2,359
N territories	101	140
R^2	0.57	0.55

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: leader's rank quintile as produced by ChatGPT.

Models include country fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

D.4 Prominence (Study 6)

Table D3. Tenure and Prominence, by Regime Type

	(1) Democracies	(2) Autocracies
Log Tenure	0.31*** (4.84)	0.25*** (5.21)
N leader-spells	2,012	4,312
N territories	205	470
R^2	0.14	0.13

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Outcome: leader's rank quintile, derived from Google Search data.

Data is restricted to the PLT, 1800-.

Models include country(-office) fixed effects and entry-year time trends. t-values are in parenthesis (from SEs clustered by country).

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