

Governing the Autocracy: The Nature of Institutions for Autocratic Rule

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Elinor Ostrom and the study of governance

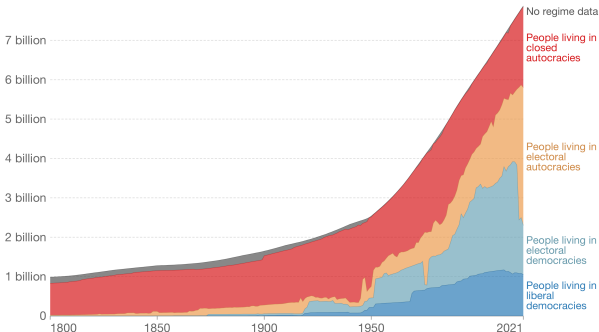


People have mostly lived in autocracies

People living in democracies and autocracies, World

Political regimes are based on the criteria of the classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the assessment by V-Dem's experts.

Our World
in Data



Source: OWID based on Lührmann et al. (2018) and V-Dem (v12), Gapminder (v6), HYDE (v3.2), and UN (2019).
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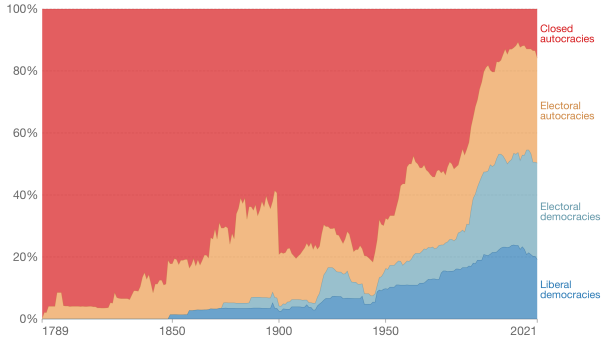
- Changing nature of autocracies
- Still $\approx 1/2$ of world's population

Most countries have been autocratic

Share of democracies and autocracies, World

Political regimes based on the criteria of the classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the assessment by V-Dem's experts.

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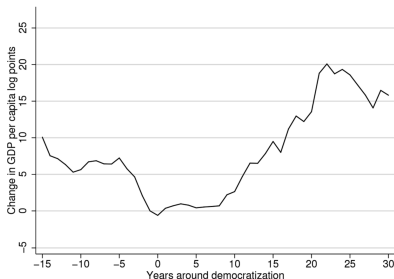
Note: The share of closed autocracies increases a lot in 1900 because V-Dem covers many more countries since then, often colonies.

► Not just China, India

Prevalence of autocracies is not due to better economic performance

Why autocratic “success”?

- ▶ Tradeoff between rights and economic performance?
- ▶ No systematic evidence of autocratic growth advantage (e.g., Acemoglu, Naidu, Restrepo, and Robinson)
- ▶ Personalist vs. non-personalist regimes



Persistence of inefficient political institutions

Why autocratic “success”? Why inefficient political institutions?

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- ▶ Difficult for winners to commit to compensating losers
 - No third party to enforce contracts (Acemoglu: no “political Coase theorem”)
 - Exceptions, e.g., delayed transitional justice (Nalepa)

Persistence of inefficient political institutions

Why autocratic “success”? Why inefficient political institutions?

- ▶ Difficult for winners to commit to compensating losers
 - No third party to enforce contracts (Acemoglu: no “political Coase theorem”)
 - Exceptions, e.g., delayed transitional justice (Nalepa)
- ▶ Limited external feedback (e.g., compared to firms)
 - Countries do not go out of business (soft budget constraints)
 - International norms and institutions discourage wars of conquest (no hostile takeovers)

Threats to autocratic rule

Autocratic rule can persist indefinitely, barring threats from within the polity

1. Coups (palace, military)
2. Revolution (peaceful, violent)



Soviet Union, 1964

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Libya, 1969

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Czechoslovakia, 1989

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Cuba, 1959

Threats to autocratic rule

Successful coup/revolution requires coordinated effort against regime (e.g., strength in numbers)

- ▶ Elites participate iff expect others to do so
- ▶ Citizens protest iff expect others to do so (Other contexts)

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Strategic complementarity *across* as well as within groups of political actors



Governing the autocracy

	Challenge	Not
Challenge	$\beta - \mu, \beta - \mu$	$-\mu, \alpha$
Not	$\alpha, -\mu$	α, α

- Assume $\beta, \mu, \alpha > 0$
 - Reward from coordination β
 - Opportunity cost of challenging $\mu - \alpha$
- If $\beta > \mu + \alpha$:
 - Coordination game
 - (*Challenge*, *Challenge*) **payoff-dominant** (i.e., efficient)
 - (*Challenge*, *Challenge*) **risk-dominant** (i.e., “likely”) if $\beta > 2(\mu + \alpha)$

Governing the autocracy

	<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Not</i>
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Tools of political survival

- **Co-optation:** increase α (costly)

Governing the autocracy



Co-optation out of military budget

Governing the autocracy

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Tools of political survival

- **Co-optation**: increase α (costly)
- **Repression**: increase μ (coordination in repression; also costly)

Governing the autocracy



Repression at expense of political independence

Governing the autocracy

	<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Not</i>
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Tools of political survival

- **Co-optation**: increase α (costly)
- **Repression**: increase μ (coordination in repression; also costly)
- **Information manipulation**: autocrat manipulates (for example) beliefs about β —“informational autocracy” (Guriev and Treisman)

Governing the autocracy



Information manipulation through “participatory technologies” (Chapman)

Governing the autocracy vs. governing the commons

Governing the autocracy: Transform (beliefs about) payoffs in coordination game such that (*Not*, *Not*) is risk-dominant, or such that *Not* is strictly dominant

Governing the autocracy vs. governing the commons

Governing the autocracy: Transform (beliefs about) payoffs in coordination game such that (*Not*, *Not*) is risk-dominant, or such that *Not* is strictly dominant

Governing the commons: Transform prisoner's dilemma into coordination game (Ostrom, 1990)

	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Not</i>
<i>Agree</i>	γ, γ	0, 0
<i>Not</i>	0, 0	0, 0

- ▶ Payoff $\gamma > 0$ from CPR institution, net cost of enforcement; payoff 0 from PD
- ▶ (*Agree*, *Agree*) payoff *and* risk dominates (*Not*, *Not*)

Governing the autocracy

- ▶ Autocracies can survive indefinitely in the absence of coups, revolutions
- ▶ Successful coup/revolution requires coordinated effort against regime
- ▶ Autocrats co-opt, repress, and/or **manipulate information** to discourage coordination

Information manipulation

What does it mean to manipulate information in autocracies?

1. Manipulate popular support (propaganda, censorship)
2. Manipulate perceptions of popular support (elections)

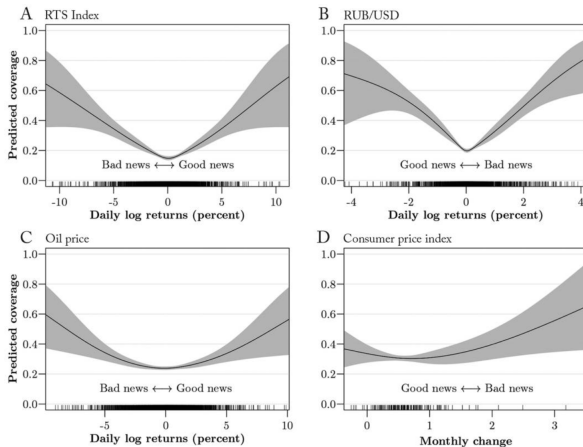
Manipulating popular support in autocracies

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 1. Autocratic media report bad news as well as good (Rozenas and Stukal)
 2. Advertising revenue liberates media owners from political influence (Lawson; Gentzkow, Glaeser, and Goldin; Petrova)
 3. Except when it doesn't (Putin)

Manipulating popular support in autocracies



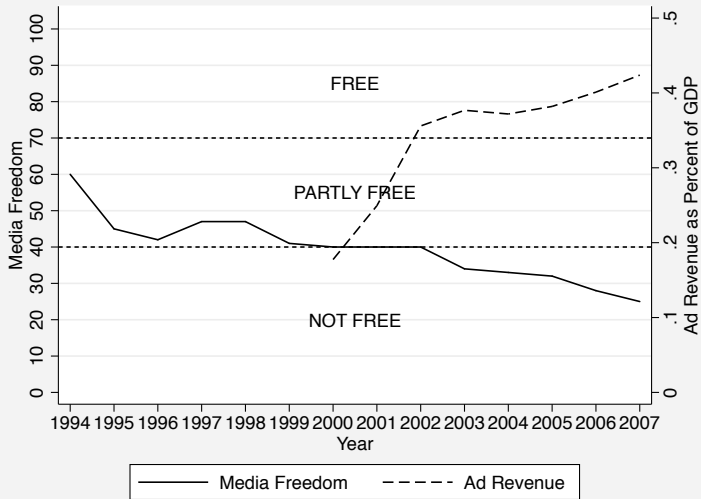
Rozenas and Stukal, *JOP*, 2019

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Manipulating popular support in autocracies

Media freedom and advertising revenue in Russia



Manipulating popular support in autocracies

Understanding propaganda:

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Tune out, turn off, take over.

Manipulating popular support in autocracies

Understanding **censorship**:

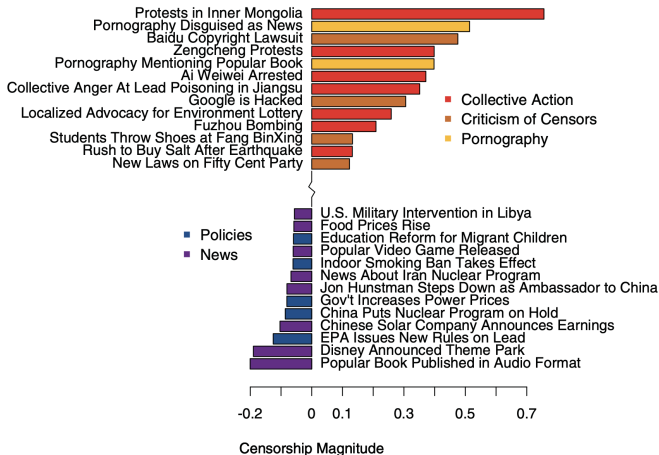
- ▶ Not misreporting but no reporting (Lorentzen, Shadmehr and Bernhardt)
- ▶ Accounting identity:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Censorship} &= \frac{\text{Banned speech}}{\text{Speech}} \\ &= 1 - \frac{\text{Allowed speech}}{\text{Allowed speech} + \text{banned speech}}\end{aligned}$$

- ▶ Typically observe allowed speech only (how??)
- ▶ King, Pan, and Roberts: monitor posts, censorship on 1400 social-media sites in China
- ▶ Censorship of speech related to social mobilization, not criticism of party/state (but Qin, Strömberg, and Wu)

Manipulating popular support in autocracies

Figure 4. Events with Highest and Lowest Censorship Magnitude



King, Pan, and Roberts, *APSR*, 2013

Manipulating popular support in autocracies

Frontier work

- ▶ Affirmation propaganda (Shirikov)
- ▶ Infiltration (Nalepa and Pop-Eleches)
- ▶ Indoctrination (Anja Neundorf, Nazrullaeva, Northmore-Ball, and Tertychnaya)

Manipulating perceptions of popular support in autocracies

- ▶ Not just popular support but *perceptions* of popular support that matter
- ▶ **Election** outcomes as signals
 - To elites (Simpser, Gehlbach and Simpser)
 - To opposition (Rozenas, Luo and Rozenas)
- ▶ Incentive to invest in elections (Smyth), including through manipulation
- ▶ Why does electoral manipulation work? Uncertainty about effectiveness (candidates disqualified, polling places closed)

Manipulating perceptions of popular support in autocracies

[Lukashenko] probably could have won without fraud or intimidation, albeit with a smaller margin. But politically, he could not afford such a victory. . . . A landslide first-round victory is a must—one can never know if the bureaucracy would change its mind in between the two rounds.

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- ▶ Do we (observers, social scientists) have any hope of gauging true support?

Understanding popular support in autocracies

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

BUSINESS

How Does Putin Stay So Popular While Losing the War in Ukraine?

Analysis by Tobin Harshaw | Bloomberg

October 1, 2022 at 12:57 p.m. EDT



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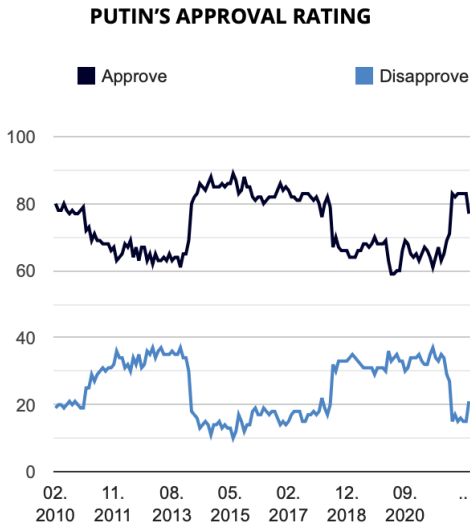
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Seven months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we're faced with a serious paradox: As things go from bad to worse for President Vladimir Putin's troops on the ground, he remains overwhelmingly popular at home. But what does overwhelming popularity actually mean in a nation with virtually no political opposition, little free press and a siege mentality?

Understanding popular support in autocracies

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Take a look at this list of politicians and tell me for how many you generally support their activities

1. Joseph Stalin
2. Leonid Brezhnev
3. Boris Yeltsin
4. [Vladimir Putin]

Support: 0 1 2 3 [4]

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- ▶ Apparent support genuine?

Understanding popular support in autocracies

Appendix Table 1: Estimated difference between list and direct estimates of support for Putin

	Contemporary list	Historical list	International B list	Political item A list
2015				
January	-6% (-16%, 5%)	-7% (-17%, 3%)		
March	-8% (-19%, 2%)	-9% (-18%, 0%)		
2020-2021				
November	-9% (-19%, 1%)	-14% (-23%, -5%)		
February		-23% (-32%, -14%)		
March	-24% (-34%, -13%)	-19% (-28% , -10%)		
June	-23% (-33%, -13%)		-21% (-31%, -12%)	
2022				
June		-21% (-30%, -12%)		-29% (-38%, -20%)

► More hesitation?

Understanding popular support in autocracies

Appendix Table 4: Estimated difference between list and direct estimates of support for Castro

	International A list	International B list	Political item B list
March 2015	-9% (-19%, 2%)		
March 2021		-22% (-32%, -12%)	
June 2022		-14% (-23%, -6%)	-31% (-41%, -21%)

► More hesitation about Castro?

Understanding popular support in autocracies

Appendix Table 2: Estimated difference between list and direct estimates of support for Navalny

	Contemporary list	Society list
February 2021	1% (-8%, 11%)	-5% (-12%, 3%)
March 2021		1% (-7%, 8%)

- No hesitation about Navalny??

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 - Autocrats manipulate popular support and perceptions of popular support
- ▶ Do we (observers, social scientists) have any hope of gauging true support?
 - Uncertainty about true support creates scope for information manipulation

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 - Help to ensure regime survival
- ▶ Much more to learn!

Governing the Autocracy: The Nature of Institutions for Autocratic Rule

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Strategic complementarity vs. strategic substitutability

- ▶ Cantoni, Yang, Yuchtman, and Zhang: effect of experimentally manipulated beliefs in Hong Kong protests suggests strategic substitutability, not complementarity
- ▶ Scope conditions
 - Long-running movement (proximity to threshold level of success, signaling value in small protests)
 - Protection of basic rights of association and expression (repression iff protest large)
- ▶ Cantoni et al.: “Strategic substitutability thus seems most likely to appear in protests that are part of larger movements and protests demanding rights from partially democratic regimes, while **forces pushing toward strategic complementarity may dominate** in one-shot protests that will end in the **ousting of a dictator** or the crushing of a movement.”
- ▶ Also Bueno de Mesquita and Shadmehr (complementarity and substitutability if material motivations)