

Authoritarianism: A Contemporary Perspective

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Introduction

This course aims at presenting a general picture of studies on authoritarianism in our era. Authoritarianism, as the oldest form of political institution in human history, has become increasingly popular in recent years. Countries such as China and Russia remain powerful and “resilient”. Many democracies, on the other hand, start to “backslide” into authoritarian regimes. Why is authoritarianism attractive to political leaders and citizens? How does an authoritarian government form, and how does it interact with its people? How do authoritarian rulers consolidate their power, and what will happen if they fail? We will explore answers to these questions together in this semester. Most studies covered by this course are built upon formal models or rigorous causal inference. We will see how the progress of methodology enhances our ability to investigate substantive puzzles, and learn to apply these techniques to our own research agenda.

Requirements

Grading of the course is based on class participation (20%) response papers and presentations during the semester (30%) and a term paper (50%).

Class Participation: All students are expected to have done the required reading before each week’s seminar and to contribute to the class discussion.

Response Papers and Class Presentations: Each week, two students will make presentations to the class. The students should coordinate to make sure that they cover all of the readings. These presentations should include (1) the findings/conclusions of the reading, (2) the methods adopted by the author(s), (3) how it contributes to our understanding of authoritarianism, and (4) what questions the readings raise for us to discuss. The presentations should be between 10-15 minutes. Slides are required. In the weeks that you are not making a presentation, you need to hand in a two-page (double-space) response paper on one or two of the readings you choose. The paper should cover the same contents as the presentation does. They will be graded and handed back to you after next week’s class.

Term paper: Each student is required to submit a term paper as the final project for this course. The term paper will take the form of research design: a formal model that hasn’t been solved, or a pre-analysis plan for an empirical study. You are encouraged to solve the model or collect the data needed, although it is not a must. The research design should look like a journal article without the result part. It should include a statement of a research question, a review of the literature related to the topic, theoretical arguments that lead to testable hypotheses or justify model assumptions,

and a description of future steps (what data and methods will be used, which equilibrium concept is considered). The paper will be between 18-20 pages.

Oral Presentation of Term Paper: This will take place in the last two weeks of the course. The idea here is to mimic giving a conference presentation on your own research. So there will be 15 minutes for the presentation, and 15 minutes for question and answer after each presentation. Performance during the presentation will affect the grade of the term paper.

Reading Assignments

Week 1: Introduction and logistics (no readings assigned)

General comments: In the first two weeks, we will have an overview of contemporary authoritarianism and some general theories that explain the functioning of authoritarian governments. As summarized by Svobik, all dictators face threats from both the elites and the people. To deal with the former, the dictator has to build up a winning coalition. For the latter, the dictator can either hold elections to test his/her popularity, or use various tools to suffocate potential rebellions. That explains why “competitive authoritarianism” is prevalent nowadays. When reading these papers, we should ask whether there exists a better way to model non-democratic governments, and what is missed in current theoretical frameworks.

Week 2: Authoritarianism in our era

- Gehlbach, Scott, Konstantin Sonin, and Milan W. Svobik. “Formal models of nondemocratic politics.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (2016): 565-584.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. Chapter 1.
- Svobik, Milan W. *The politics of authoritarian rule*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. Chapter 1.

Week 3: Some general theories

- Acemoglu, Daron, Georgy Egorov, and Konstantin Sonin. “Political selection and persistence of bad governments.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 125.4 (2010): 1511-1575.
- Fearon, James D. “Self-enforcing democracy.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126.4 (2011): 1661-1708.
- Guriev, Sergei, and Daniel Treisman. “How modern dictators survive: An informational theory of the new authoritarianism.” No. w21136. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015.
- Egorov, Georgy, and Konstantin Sonin. “The Political Economics of Non-democracy.” NBER Working Paper 27949 (2020).

General comments: The theme in the following two weeks is elite politics. We have known that elites probably play a more critical role in non-democratic regimes. As the ruler lacks approaches to make credible commitment, it is necessary for him/her to develop more delicate mechanisms to curb the behavior of elites. Some rulers rely on purge, while others prefer to share power and rent via legislature. How do these mechanisms contribute to the regime's stability? Why are the elites willing to play this game? We need to find answers from these readings.

Week 4: Legislature

- Myerson, Roger B. "The autocrat's credibility problem and foundations of the constitutional state." *American Political Science Review* 102.1 (2008): 125-139.
- Malesky, Edmund, and Paul Schuler. "Nodding or needling: Analyzing delegate responsiveness in an authoritarian parliament." *American Political Science Review* 104.3 (2010): 482-502.
- Truex, Rory. "The returns to office in a "rubber stamp" parliament." *American Political Science Review* 108.2 (2014): 235-251.

Week 5: Purge and coup d'état

- Svobik, Milan W. "Power sharing and leadership dynamics in authoritarian regimes." *American Journal of Political Science* 53.2 (2009): 477-494.
- Esberg, Jane. "Anticipating Dissent: The Repression of Politicians in Pinochet's Chile." (2018)
- Naidu, Suresh, James A. Robinson, and Lauren E. Young. "Social origins of dictatorships: Elite networks and political transitions in Haiti." CDEP-CGEG working paper series 31 (2015): 1-47.

General comments: Even dictators could be held accountable, although it takes more efforts. Some authoritarian countries have elections, but the result is largely decided by the incumbent's political machine. It is noteworthy that the machine is far from flawless and often bothered by agency problem. Electoral fraud usually make citizens feel alienated and infuriated, and force them to protect their rights through protest. There are multiple explanations of the emergence of protests, and more empirical evidence has been accumulated recently. Yet more puzzles are raised rather than solved. For example, how do election and protest interact with one another?

Week 6: Election and electoral fraud

- Gehlbach, Scott, and Alberto Simpser. "Electoral manipulation as bureaucratic control." *American Journal of Political Science* 59.1 (2015): 212-224.

- Larreguy, Horacio, Cesar E. Montiel Olea, and Pablo Querubin. “Political Brokers: Partisans or Agents? Evidence from the Mexican Teachers’ Union.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61.4 (2017): 877-891.
- Croke, Kevin, et al. “Deliberate disengagement: how education can decrease political participation in electoral authoritarian regimes.” *American Political Science Review* 110.3 (2016): 579-600.
- Rundlett, Ashlea, and Milan W. Svobik. “Deliver the vote! micromotives and macrobehavior in electoral fraud.” *American Political Science Review* 110.1 (2016): 180-197.

Week 7: Protest I

- Kuran, Timur. “Now out of never: The element of surprise in the East European revolution of 1989.” *World politics* 44.1 (1991): 7-48.
- Beissinger, Mark R. “The semblance of democratic revolution: Coalitions in Ukraine’s orange revolution.” *American Political Science Review* 107.3 (2013): 574-592.
- Casper, Brett Allen, and Scott A. Tyson. “Popular Protest and Elite Coordination in a Coup d’état.” *The Journal of Politics* 76.2 (2014): 548-564.
- Chen, Heng, and Wing Suen. “Radicalism in Mass Movements: Asymmetric Information and Endogenous Leadership.” *American Political Science Review* (2020): 1-21.

Week 8: Protest II

- Gonzalez, Felipe. “Collective Action in Networks: Evidence from the Chilean Student Movement.” (2016).
- Rosenfeld, Bryn. “Reevaluating the Middle-Class Protest Paradigm: A Case-Control Study of Democratic Protest Coalitions in Russia.” *American Political Science Review* 111.4 (2017): 637-652.
- Enikolopov, Ruben, Alexey Makarin, and Maria Petrova. “Social Media and Protest Participation: Evidence from Russia.” (2016).

General comments: Authoritarian governments do terrible things. They use propaganda to brainwash people, censorship to block the diffusion of information, and repression and cooptation to cripple the opposition. Are these actions indispensable for the regime’s survival? Are they really making a difference? How does the government decide its strategies and how ordinary people react to them? These are the central questions for the next two weeks.

Week 9: Propaganda and censorship

- Enikolopov, Ruben, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. “Media and political persuasion: Evidence from Russia.” *American Economic Review* 101.7 (2011): 3253-85.

- Rosenfeld, Bryn. "The Popularity Costs of Economic Crisis under Electoral Authoritarianism: Evidence from Russia." *American Journal of Political Science* 62.2 (2018): 382-397.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. "How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression." *American Political Science Review* 107.2 (2013): 326-343.
- Chen, Yuyu, and David Y. Yang. "1984 or the Brave New World? Evidence from a Field Experiment on Media Censorship in China." (2017).

Week 10: Repression and cooptation

- Pan, Jennifer, and Alexandra A. Siegel. "How Saudi crackdowns fail to silence online dissent." *American Political Science Review* 114.1 (2020): 109-125.
- Rozenas, Arturas, and Yuri M. Zhukov. "Mass repression and political loyalty: Evidence from Stalin's terror by hunger'." *American Political Science Review* 113.2 (2019): 569-583.
- Esberg, Jane. "Censorship as Reward: Evidence from Pop Culture Censorship in Chile." *American Political Science Review* 114.3 (2020): 821-836.
- Xu, Xu. "To Repress or to Coopt? Authoritarian Control in the Age of Digital Surveillance." *American Journal of Political Science* (2020).

General comments: Under what conditions authoritarian governments fall? What do they leave to the new regime? Again, both elites and citizens matter in this process. We will see that their collaboration accelerates the regime's collapse. And the experience under authoritarianism cast a long shadow over a society and affects both its culture and institution in the future. What's the paradigm of democratization in our era? How persistent are "legacies" of authoritarianism in various dimensions? We need more explorations toward these directions.

Week 11: Democratization

- Przeworski, Adam. "Democracy and development: Political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950-1990." Vol. 3. Cambridge University Press, 2000. Chapter 2.
- Ziblatt, Daniel. "Conservative Political Parties and the Birth of Modern Democracy in Europe." Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Aidt, Toke S., and Raphael Franck. "Democratization under the threat of revolution: Evidence from the Great Reform Act of 1832." *Econometrica* 83.2 (2015): 505-547.
- Casper, Brett Allen, and Scott A. Tyson. "Popular Protest and Elite Coordination in a Coup d'état." *The Journal of Politics* 76.2 (2014): 548-564.

Week 12: Legacies of authoritarianism

- Nalepa, Monika. “Skeletons in the closet: Transitional justice in post-communist Europe.” Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- MartinezBravo, Monica, Priya Mukherjee, and Andreas Stegmann. “The NonDemocratic Roots of Elite Capture: Evidence From Soeharto Mayors in Indonesia.” *Econometrica* 85.6 (2017): 1991-2010.
- Pop-Eleches, Grigore, and Joshua A. Tucker. “Communism’s Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes.” Princeton University Press, 2017. Chapter 1.
- Albertus, Michael, and Victor Menaldo. “Authoritarianism and the elite origins of democracy.” Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Week 13: Democratic backsliding

- Graham, Matthew H., and Milan W. Svobik. “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States.” *American Political Science Review* 114.2 (2020): 392-409.
- Gandhi, Jennifer, and Elvin Ong. “Committed or conditional democrats? opposition dynamics in electoral autocracies.” *American Journal of Political Science* 63.4 (2019): 948-963.
- Luo, Zhaotian, and Adam Przeworski. “Subversion by Stealth: Dynamics of Democratic Backsliding.” Available at SSRN 3469373 (2019).

Week 14: Student Presentations