

# Propaganda in Autocracies

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Propaganda becomes ineffective the moment we are aware of it.

– Joseph Goebbels

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

– Milan Kundera

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**Part I**

**Foundations**

# Chapter 1

## Persuasion and Domination

### 1.1 Strategies of Propaganda in Autocracies

“As long as people think that the dictator’s power is secure,” Tullock (1987) wrote, “it is secure.” When citizens think otherwise, all at once, a dictator’s power is anything but, as Kuran (1989, 1991) and Lohmann (1993) observed after the Soviet Union’s collapse. This conviction – that power rests ultimately on citizens believing in it – has long compelled the world’s autocrats to invest in sophisticated propaganda apparatuses. This book draws on the first global dataset of autocratic propaganda, encompassing nearly eight million newspaper articles from 70 countries in six languages. We document dramatic variation in propaganda across autocracies: in coverage of the regime and its opponents, in narratives about domestic and international life, in the threats of violence issued to citizens, and in the domestic events that shape it. We also show that propaganda has a meaningful and plausibly causal effect on collective action.

Why does propaganda vary so dramatically across autocracies? The answer, put simply, is that different autocrats employ propaganda to achieve different ends. Most autocrats now govern with nominally democratic institutions: regular elections, national parliaments, and opposition parties. Some autocrats are more constrained by these institutions than others, either because their recourse to repression is limited by international pressure or because they confront domestic institutions or pressure groups that bind them. Where these electoral constraints are relatively binding, autocrats must curry some amount of popular support, and so they employ propaganda to persuade citizens of regime merits. To be persuasive, however, propaganda apparatuses must cultivate the appearance of neutrality, which requires conceding bad news and policy failures. Where electoral constraints are binding, we find, propaganda apparatuses cover the regime much like Fox News covers Republicans.

Where autocrats confront no electoral constraints – where autocrats can fully secure themselves with repression – propaganda serves not to persuade citizens, but to dominate them. Propaganda derives its power from its absurdity. By forcing citizens to consume content that everyone knows to be false, autocrats make their capacity for repression common knowledge. Propaganda apparatuses



engage in absurdly positive pro-regime coverage, while pretending opposition does not exist. Narratives about a country’s contemporary history are presented in absurd terms, for these absurdities give them power. Citizens are told that their countries are envied around the world, crime does not exist, “democracy” is alive and vibrant, and that the dictator is a champion of national sports. Propaganda apparatuses routinely and explicitly threaten citizens with violence.

Students of autocratic politics generally regard nominally democratic institutions as forces for stability and regime survival as secured through patronage and repression. Our approach is different. We view nominally democratic institutions as constraints that autocrats attempt to loosen and citizens’ beliefs as the key battlefield on which the struggle for political change is waged. Most broadly, we show that even weak electoral constraints force autocrats to wage the battle for citizens’ beliefs from a position of weakness. To persuade citizens of their regimes’ merits, electorally constrained autocrats must acknowledge policy failures that risk confirming citizens’ frustrations and facilitating collective action. We draw from a range of disciplines to illustrate how. Our theory is informed by field research in China and Central Africa. We use computational tools to collect and measure propaganda, statistical and network techniques to analyze it, survey experiments to understand its cognitive effects on citizens, and case studies to bring it to life. Many of these case studies are of intrinsic historical importance. We explain why Russian President Vladimir Putin’s propaganda apparatus uses Donald Trump as a propaganda tool, why the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) flagship propaganda newspaper is more effusive than any point since the Cultural Revolution, why Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali publicized his regime’s failures before becoming the Arab Spring’s first casualty, and why Cameroonian President Paul Biya produces different propaganda in English and French. We show that propaganda has a plausibly causal effect on popular protest.

Two autocracies are emblematic of the propaganda strategies we document: the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Congo. China is among the few autocracies that does not organize national elections. Congo, though a leading oil exporter, is so afflicted with corruption that it routinely seeks debt relief from Western creditors, which require regular elections in return. Their propaganda strategies look dramatically different to readers. The CCP aims to dominate; Denis Sassou Nguesso must persuade.

### **1.1.1 Propaganda as Persuasion: The Republic of Congo**

Sassou Nguesso, who has ruled Congo for all but five years since 1979, is among the world’s most corrupt autocrats. As of 2012, in France alone, Sassou Nguesso owned more than 30 properties, 112 bank accounts, and a fleet of luxury vehicles. In 2016, a Canadian court ruled that the Sassou Nguesso family was “a criminal organization.” Sassou Nguesso has so badly mismanaged the economy that in 2017, just six years after it received debt relief from the IMF and World Bank, the government’s debt/GDP ratio reached 130%.

Citizens know of Sassou Nguesso's corruption, and many loathe him for it. Yet they also read his propaganda newspaper, *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville*, or "Dispatches from Brazzaville." To be sure, *Les Dépêches* is Congo's easiest newspaper to access. It is printed daily, subsidized by the government to keep its purchase price low, and printed in color. In each of these respects, *Les Dépêches* is more attractive than its competitors. *La Semaine Africaine* has long been regarded as Congo's *vieille dame*: its "gray lady," a reference to *The New York Times*. Founded as a church newsletter in the 1950s, *La Semaine Africaine* became Congo's newspaper of record during the democratic transition in the early 1990s. It now publishes twice weekly and, although its journalists self-censor, it remains independent. Other independent newspapers abound, many more critical of the government and some routinely punished for it.

Why do citizens who loathe Sassou Nguesso consume his propaganda? The answer is not uncertainty about its ownership. Although *Les Dépêches* is neither state-run nor legally affiliated with Sassou Nguesso's *Parti Congolais du Travail* (PCT), there is no doubt it is Sassou Nguesso's mouthpiece. The answer is also not that citizens have no other options. Citizens are not forced to purchase *Les Dépêches* and boycott *La Semaine Africaine*. Having moderated its editorial line, *La Semaine Africaine* is now regarded as an "acceptable" independent newspaper. Perhaps as a result, it has also attracted enough consumers to remain in print.

The answer, many citizens say, is that *Les Dépêches* publishes a substantial amount of legitimate news, which citizens want to read. It is, indeed, a professionally run media organization. It recruits top students from Congo's flagship university, who are lured by salaries substantially higher than its competitors. It has foreign bureaus in Kinshasa and Paris. It prints a daily Kinshasa edition. Its French editor, Jean-Paul Pigasse, was previously a senior figure at several widely respected French publications, including *Les Echos*, *L'Express*, and *Jeune Afrique*. Pigasse is reportedly well compensated, part of Sassou Nguesso's money laundering operation.<sup>1</sup>

The journalistic integrity of Sassou Nguesso's propaganda apparatus should not be overstated. It is propaganda, and it exists to advance Sassou Nguesso's interests. Its coverage is consistently, if subtly, skewed in his favor. Sassou Nguesso figures prominently in the account of Congo's history that *Les Dépêches* narrates for readers. The newspaper publishes roughly 35 articles per day, distributed across topics that readers of the *New York Times* would find familiar: current affairs, finance, sports, culture, and classified ads. Each day, Sassou Nguesso appears in about three of these articles, mostly in connection with the economy or international cooperation. *Les Dépêches* covers Sassou Nguesso about as positively as Fox News covers the Republican Party. His political rivals receive some coverage, but, upon reflection, a bit less. These rivals are seldom criticized.

Congolese citizens read Sassou Nguesso's propaganda by choice. It is skewed, but not so heavily that citizens refuse to consume it.

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<sup>1</sup>Le Parisien (2002).

### 1.1.2 Propaganda as Domination: The People's Republic of China

Few Chinese citizens enjoy reading the *People's Daily*. Still, China's most disliked newspaper sits on every newsstand. Persuaded that propaganda was "the most important job of the Red Army," Mao Zedong routinely edited the *People's Daily*.<sup>2</sup> For citizens, reading it was "a political obligation."<sup>3</sup> Government offices were until recently required to subscribe. The *People's Daily* is the CCP's flagship newspaper, and its content frequently appears in other platforms, since all Chinese media outlets are majority owned by the state. Journalists are required to pass ideological exams and, later, attend the Propaganda Department's "refresher courses."<sup>4</sup> Most journalists are Party members, and non-members are forbidden from covering politics.<sup>5</sup>

The *People's Daily* seeks not to persuade readers, but to dominate them. Huang (2015a, 420) puts it succinctly: "such propaganda is not meant to 'brainwash' people with its specific content about how good the government is, but rather to forewarn the society about how strong it is via the act of propaganda itself." Its effusively pro-regime content, as well the threats it occasionally issues to citizens, make this clear. On April 26, 1989, the *People's Daily* published a now infamous editorial: "We Must Take a Clear-cut Stand against Disturbances." The editorial condemned the student protests in Tiananmen Square, and newspapers across the country were required to place it on their front pages. An "extremely small number of people with ulterior motives" had taken advantage of the students, who were engaged in a "conspiracy" to "plunge the whole country into chaos." It concluded with a warning:

If we are tolerant of or conniving with this disturbance and let it go unchecked, a seriously chaotic state will appear. ...Our country will have no peaceful days if this disturbance is not checked resolutely.<sup>6</sup>

The massacre came on June 4, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) killed between 3,000 and 10,000 citizens. "Stability overrides everything," Deng Xiaoping announced in the massacre's aftermath and again, in a front page editorial, on its one year anniversary.<sup>7</sup> Several *People's Daily* reporters joined the Tiananmen protests, with signs that read: "We don't want to lie anymore." They were purged.<sup>8</sup> As we document in Chapter 9, the CCP now reminds Beijing's urban class each June 4 of its brutal campaign of repression against ethnic Uyghers in Xinjiang region.

The CCP is quite clear about its propaganda objectives. In 2013, journalist Gao Yu leaked an internal Party directive, known as Document 9, that described China's "ideological situation" as "a complicated, intense struggle." Media must be "infused" with the "spirit of the Party" and "promote

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<sup>2</sup>Mao Zedong (1929).

<sup>3</sup>Yu (1964, 97).

<sup>4</sup>Brady (2008, 81).

<sup>5</sup>Brady (2008, 116).

<sup>6</sup>English translation available at <http://tsquare.tv/chronology/April26ed.html>.

<sup>7</sup>稳定压倒一切, see *People's Daily* (1991).

<sup>8</sup>Bell (2014).

the unification of thought.” The Party must “allow absolutely no opportunity for incorrect thinking to spread.”<sup>9</sup> Though Gao was sentenced to seven years in prison, CCP officials occasionally say the same thing. In 2009, Jiangxi party secretary Su Rong told journalists that “stability is our principle task.” “Particularly in the case of sudden-breaking news and mass incidents” – protests, that is – “we must get in faster, forestalling our opponents by a show of strength.”<sup>10</sup> In 2010, the Propaganda Department simply banned bad news from the front pages of newspapers.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, as exiled novelist Ma Jian puts it, Chinese propaganda is “filled with absurdities.”<sup>12</sup> In 2017, the *People’s Daily* claimed that Xi Jinping’s contributions to Chinese diplomacy had “transcended 300 years of western theory on foreign affairs.” Not to be outdone, one state-run television network ran a six episode series on Xi’s “Major Country Diplomacy.” “Wherever he goes,” claimed one episode, “Xi Jinping sets off a whirlwind of charisma!”<sup>13</sup>

The *People’s Daily* does obvious violence to the truth, and hence to the experiences of Chinese citizens. For this, many loathe it, as the *People’s Daily* various and vulgar sobriquets make clear.<sup>14</sup> The newspaper is routinely called *Riren Minbao*, a phonetic play on *Renmin Ribao*, or “Raping People Daily.”<sup>15</sup> One anonymous activist even created an eponymous Twitter account that retweets articles that are particularly offensive for their effusiveness. The *People’s Daily*, the Twitter account observes, is the “newspaper no one is willing to read,” in which the “news content and opinions are the opposite of the public’s perception.”<sup>16</sup> It “is nonsense and does violence to the people.”<sup>17</sup>

The CCP’s propaganda bears virtually no resemblance to Sassou Nguesso’s: in its stridency, its use of absurd narratives, and the extent to which it threatens to citizens.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.2 Antecedents

These two propaganda strategies are fundamentally at odds. For one, propaganda is powerful when subtle: when citizens are unaware of how they are being manipulated. For the other, propaganda

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<sup>9</sup>ChinaFile (2013).

<sup>10</sup>Bandurski (2009).

<sup>11</sup>New York Times (2010).

<sup>12</sup>Ma Jian (2018).

<sup>13</sup>Phillips (2017).

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Abad-Santos (2013). One ditty goes: “All conferences solemnly started and ended with glory // All speeches are important and the applause is warm // All the work is finished with success and all the achievements are tremendous // All the effort is thorough and remarkable” (Miao Di 2011, 105-107).

<sup>15</sup>人民日报 and 日人民报, respectively. See <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/日人民报> .

<sup>16</sup>“没有人民愿意看的日报. ...新闻内容与观点通常与大众的认知成颠倒状态.” @FuckPeopleNews.

<sup>17</sup>人民日报, 胡说八道! 人民日报, 暴日人民!

<sup>18</sup>As we discuss in Chapter 4, there is substantial evidence that the CCP government permits local newspapers to occasionally criticize local governments. Stockmann (2013), Lorentzen (2014), and Repnikova (2017b) suggest that this enables Beijing to monitor local officials or to otherwise gauge public opinion. Critically, we distinguish between local newspapers and the *People’s Daily*, the CCP’s flagship newspaper, which, our evidence suggests, serves to signal the CCP’s strength rather than monitor local officials.

derives its power from absurdity: from forcing citizens to consume information they know to be false, and to be seen doing so publicly. However inconsistent they are, these two propaganda strategies also have deep historical origins. Students of propaganda – some of whom were practitioners – have long sought to understand the principles that make each strategy effective.

### 1.2.1 Propaganda as Persuasion: Joseph Goebbels, Bayesian

“Propaganda,” Joseph Goebbels wrote, “becomes ineffective the moment we are aware of it.”<sup>19</sup> This conviction permeated his work atop the Nazi propaganda apparatus.<sup>20</sup> Since broadcasting exclusively positive news would “fairly compel the German public to listen to foreign and enemy broadcasts,” Goebbels instructed state media to report bad news and policy failures. Goebbels insisted on truth, “otherwise the enemy or the facts might expose falsehoods.” He routinely employed “black propaganda”: “word of mouth” campaigns waged by “faithful citizens, which were successful as long as the citizens targeted by these campaigns were unaware of them.”<sup>21</sup> Harold Lasswell (1938, 110, 203), who pioneered the study of propaganda in the American academy, endorsed Goebbels’ strategy: “Reveal losses when they come. ...It is ridiculous to pretend that the enemy never wins a point.”

Propagandists have long imputed Bayesian rationality to their audiences and tailored their propaganda accordingly.<sup>22</sup> To recruit soldiers for the First Crusade, in 1065 Pope Urban II implored Christians to “wrest that land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourselves.” He planted individuals in the audience to cry out “God wills it!” throughout the speech.<sup>23</sup> Otto von Bismarck employed a dedicated propaganda secretary, whose work Bismarck reviewed to ensure its style and syntax would resonate with its intended audience.<sup>24</sup> To curry support in London, Napoleon Bonaparte quietly founded the *Argus* newspaper, which was fronted by an Englishman but surreptitiously produced by the French Foreign Office. Erich Ludendorff, a German general during World War I, wrote that good propaganda must “mold public opinion without appearing to do so.”<sup>25</sup> Ludendorff’s foes across the English Channel agreed. According to one British propagandist: “The art of propaganda is not telling lies, but selecting the truth you require and giving it mixed up with some truths the audience wants to hear.”<sup>26</sup> Scholars in the mid-20th century were so impressed by the ability of propagandists to strategize with the tools of Bayesian rationality that they sought to

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<sup>19</sup>Taylor (1998), Cunningham (2002).

<sup>20</sup>Longerich (2015).

<sup>21</sup>For a distillation of Goebbels’ 6,800 page diary into 19 core principles, see Doob (1950).

<sup>22</sup>We use the term “Bayesian rationality” to refer to the idea that citizens will discount positive propaganda or political communication by how credible they view the messenger and how consistent it is with their past experiences. More generally, social scientists regard citizens as Bayesian if they update their beliefs in response to the information they consume.

<sup>23</sup>Thomson (1999), Jowett and O’Donnell (2012).

<sup>24</sup>Lasswell (1938).

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Lasswell (1938).

<sup>26</sup>Schramm (1955, 83).

explain why modern man was so susceptible to manipulation.<sup>27</sup>

Much contemporary scholarship on autocratic propaganda is motivated by Goebbels' core insight: that to persuade citizens of the regime's merits, propaganda must occasionally concede the regime's failings. Formal theorists have led this research agenda.<sup>28</sup> By mixing factual reporting with useful fictions, propaganda apparatuses can acquire a reputation for credibility, and hence the capacity to shape citizens' beliefs.<sup>29</sup> If citizens are not completely rational, the scope for propaganda to manipulate their beliefs is more profound. Citizens may underestimate the biases in media content,<sup>30</sup> be constrained by memory limitations,<sup>31</sup> or double count repeated information.<sup>32</sup>

It is unclear whether Jean-Paul Pigasse, the architect of Denis Sassou Nguesso's propaganda apparatus, has read Goebbels' diaries. He has probably not studied the formal models of modern political science. But their approaches to propaganda are identical.

### 1.2.2 Propaganda as Domination: Hannah Arendt Goes to China

China's *People's Daily* would be puzzling to Goebbels, and is puzzling in the context of formal theories of persuasion. But it would be deeply familiar to students of totalitarianism. For Hannah Arendt, propaganda under totalitarianism served to force citizens to submit to the regime's historical narrative, despite what they knew to be true.<sup>33</sup> As Levy (2016) put it:

The great analysts of truth and speech under totalitarianism – George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, Vaclav Havel – can help us recognize this kind of lie for what it is. ...Saying something obviously untrue, and making your subordinates repeat it with a straight face in their own voice, is a particularly startling display of power over them. It's something that was endemic to totalitarianism. ...Being made to repeat an obvious lie makes it clear that you're powerless; it also makes you complicit.

This display of regime power has been expressed in a range of ways. In North Korea, households must keep radios tuned to the state-run radio station. They can be turned down, but never off. Independent media were illegal in the Soviet Union, as in contemporary China. In the 1930s, all Soviet cities had loudspeakers on the streets, which broadcast propaganda. Every day started with the national anthem, and ended with it. The Soviet government outlawed radios that could access independent stations and photocopiers that could print anti-regime pamphlets.<sup>34</sup> This domination

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<sup>27</sup>See Ellul (1973).

<sup>28</sup>For useful reviews of formal models of propaganda and a discussion of different theoretical conceptions of media bias, see Gentzkow, Shapiro and Stone (2014), Strömberg (2015), and Prat (2016). Groeling (2013, 131) also reviews a number of definitions of media bias.

<sup>29</sup>Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006), Gehlbach and Sonin (2014), Yu (2019).

<sup>30</sup>Cain, Loewenstein and Moore (2005), Eyster and Rabin (N.d.).

<sup>31</sup>Mullainathan, Schwartzstein and Shleifer (2008).

<sup>32</sup>DeMarzo, Vayanos and Zwiebel (2003).

<sup>33</sup>Arendt (1951).

<sup>34</sup>Soldatov and Borogan (2015, 11-12).

gave rise to some of the 20th century’s most enduring literature. The “struggle of man against power,” Czech novelist Milan Kundera wrote, is “the struggle of memory against forgetting.” For Kundera, resistance is the individual’s effort to insist on what she knows to be true in the face of an informational environment that claims otherwise. As Vaclav Havel and Milan Kundera recede from memory, a new generation of Chinese luminaries – Yan Lianke, Ma Jian, and Ai Weiwei chief among them – is reminding the world about the struggle of memory against forgetting.

Arendt’s insights helped contemporary scholars make sense of the 20th century’s most repressive dictatorships. In Hafez al-Assad’s Syria, Wedeen (1999) writes, “power manifests itself in the regime’s ability to impose its fictions upon the world. No one is deceived by the charade, but everyone ...is forced to participate in it.” Syrian citizens were not required to believe the “mystifications” the regime put forth. Rather, they were required to act *as if* they did. In so doing, Wedeen quotes Vaclav Havel approvingly, they live “within the lie.” They “confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system.”<sup>35</sup> Wedeen continues:

By [saying something manifestly spurious], each [citizen] demonstrates the regime’s power to dominate him. The [citizen] comes to know about himself, and about others, that each can be made to subordinate to state authority not only his body, but also his imagination.

Wedeen’s account echoes Richard Rorty’s study of *Animal Farm*: “The only point in making Winston believe that two and two equals five is to break him.”<sup>36</sup>

Huang (2015a)’s work on Chinese propaganda should be understood in this context. As in Arendt’s Soviet Union, Kundera’s Czechoslovakia, Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, and Wedeen’s Syria, the CCP’s propaganda is designed to *signal* to citizens, not persuade them:

By being able to afford significant resources to present a unified propaganda message and impose it on citizens, a government that has a strong capacity in maintaining social control and political order can send a credible signal about this capacity and distinguish itself from a weak government, hence implicitly intimidating the masses who may otherwise contemplate regime change.<sup>37</sup>

Propaganda compels citizens to view the government as strong, Huang finds, not good. For this, as the *People’s Daily*’s various and vulgar sobriquets make clear, many Chinese citizens loathe it.

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<sup>35</sup>For more, see Havel (1978).

<sup>36</sup>See also Orwell (1949) and Rorty (1989).

<sup>37</sup>Huang (2015a, 420). See also Shih (2008).

## 1.3 Explanation

### 1.3.1 Institutions and Uncertainty

Why do different autocrats employ different propaganda strategies? Our theory, which we develop in Chapter 2, rests on two foundations. First, most autocrats now govern with political institutions that, on the surface, look democratic. There are regular elections, national parliaments, opposition parties, and a handful of independent newspapers. The left panel of Figure 1.1 illustrates this. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, roughly 80% of the world’s autocrats have governed with nominally democratic institutions. These electoral institutions are more binding in some autocracies than others. Some autocrats can engineer so much fraud that elections are completely meaningless, as in Uzbekistan, while other autocrats can tilt the electoral playing field only to a degree. This variation may be driven by many factors. Some autocrats are more vulnerable to international pressure to respect citizens’ basic rights.<sup>38</sup> Some autocrats may have less control over security forces<sup>39</sup> or key sectors of the economy.<sup>40</sup> Some autocrats may confront strong civil societies, which can credibly threaten protest.<sup>41</sup> The world’s autocrats exist along a continuum, from totally unconstrained by electoral institutions, as in China or Uzbekistan, to potentially quite constrained.

Our theory’s second foundation is uncertainty, for life in autocracies is full of it. Autocratic governments disclose information selectively and restrict media freedom.<sup>42</sup> Journalists self-censor.<sup>43</sup> Citizens know that saying the wrong thing to the wrong person may lead to incarceration.<sup>44</sup> This is so common that Chinese citizens have euphemisms for it: to be “invited to tea” or to be “harmonized.” Together, these forces foster a culture of pervasive distrust among citizens, which discourages affection among neighbors and sometimes within families.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>McFaul (2007), Levitsky and Way (2010), Hyde (2011), Donno (2013), Hyde and Marinov (2014), Escribà-Folch and Wright (2015), Carter (2016*b*), Carnegie and Marinov (2017), Carothers (2018).

<sup>39</sup>Levitsky and Way (2010), Schedler (2010*b*).

<sup>40</sup>Greene (2009, 2010), Seeberg (2017), Dasgupta (2018).

<sup>41</sup>Lahoucq and Molina (2002), McFaul (2002, 2005, 2007), Bunce and Wolchik (2006, 2010, 2011), Howard and Roessler (2006), Lindberg (2006), Beaulieu and Hyde (2009), Schedler (2009), Diamond (2010), Magaloni (2010), Schedler (2010*a*), Donno (2013), Beaulieu (2014), Hyde and Marinov (2014), Trejo (2014), Steinert-Threlkeld et al. (2015), Brancati (2016), Christensen and Garfias (2018).

<sup>42</sup>Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009), Stier (2014), Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland (2015), Whitten-Woodring and Van Belle (2015).

<sup>43</sup>Stier (2014), Sundaram (2016).

<sup>44</sup>Policzer (2009), Truex (2019), Lichter, Löffler and Siegloch (2018), Thomson (2019).

<sup>45</sup>Lichter, Löffler and Siegloch (2018).



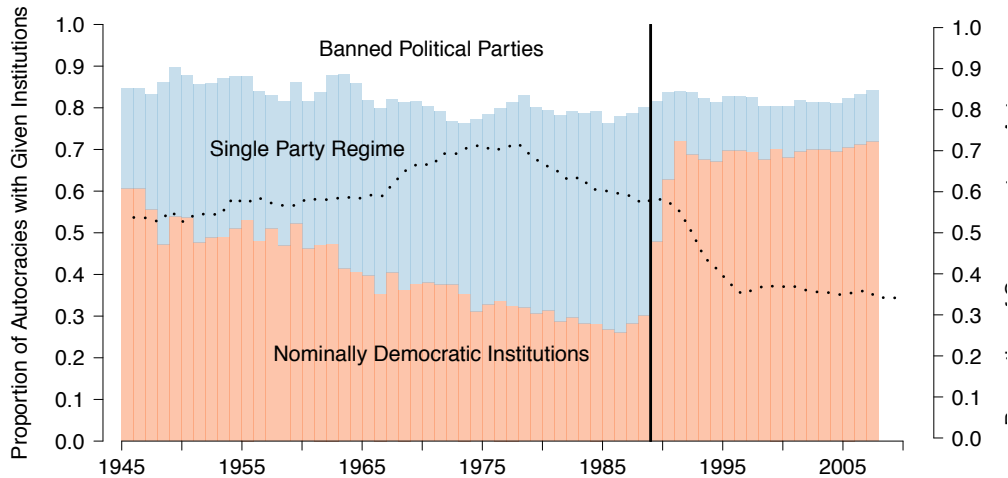


Figure 1.1: Political institutions in the world’s autocracies since 1945. The vertical line marks the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The dashed line gives the share of all governments that are autocracies. The data are drawn from Gandhi (2008) and Svobik (2012).

### 1.3.2 Persuasion, Welfare, and Honest Propaganda

Our theory focuses on two sources of uncertainty. First, citizens are uncertain about the link between government policies and the outcomes around them.<sup>46</sup> They can observe the latter: whether incomes are rising, whether instruction in public schools is improving, whether crime is under control. Citizens cannot, however, observe precisely what the autocrat did: whether he implemented sound policies or, instead, is incompetent or corrupt. As a result of this uncertainty, if living standards fail to improve, citizens are unsure precisely why. Although the regime may be incompetent or corrupt, it is also possible that its policies are sound, that these issues are difficult and hence require time to resolve, and that the government’s policies will soon yield gains. Alternatively, it is also possible that there was some exogenous shock, which was outside the government’s control and prevented its otherwise sound policies from working.

If citizens are unhappy with the autocrat’s performance, then, where autocrats organize regular elections, they can vote against him. This possibility leads to our theory’s first use of propaganda. An autocrat can employ propaganda to persuade citizens that whatever frustrating outcomes they observe are not due to government failures, and that the government is working to improve things. The propaganda apparatus aims to cultivate genuine support, despite the frustrations citizens may have. To do so, however, the propaganda apparatus must have a reputation for credibility among citizens. For as long as the author of propaganda is also its chief beneficiary, citizens will be inclined to discount it, *unless* the propaganda apparatus has a history of providing some objective coverage. Put simply, to persuade citizens of useful fictions, propaganda apparatuses must have a

<sup>46</sup>Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009).

reputation for occasionally reporting damaging facts. This was Goebbels' core insight and a key result of formal theories of propaganda.<sup>47</sup> We refer to this reputation as *credibility capital* and the damaging facts required to build it as *honest propaganda*.

This is propaganda as persuasion. Denis Sassou Nguesso employs it when his propaganda apparatus covers a devastating fuel shortage, despite Congo's position as Africa's fourth leading oil producer, as does Russian President Vladimir Putin when his TV networks cover economic downturns.<sup>48</sup>

### 1.3.3 Domination, Common Knowledge, and Absurd Propaganda

Citizens may also attempt to remove an autocrat through mass protests. When autocrats can fully tilt the electoral playing field or simply refuse to hold elections, this is citizens' chief recourse. In deciding whether to protest, citizens consider a range of factors: the probability an alternative government implements better policies, the autocrat's capacity for violence, and their beliefs about their compatriots' beliefs.<sup>49</sup>

Autocrats can signal their capacity for violence in a range of ways. They can incarcerate dissidents, block independent media, and fill the streets with police.<sup>50</sup> They can commit human rights abuses that the international community condemns, which signal their capacity to withstand international pressure. These forms of repression aim not just to suppress dissent, but also to signal to citizens its consequences. Similarly, autocrats can employ *absurd propaganda*: content that everyone knows is false, and that everyone knows everyone knows is false. Absurd propaganda is premised on *common knowledge of the possible*. While citizens may not know the precise rate of economic growth or public health spending, there exist claims that citizens know are absurd, either because of direct observation or universally held conventional wisdom. This constitutes the second role of propaganda in our theory. By covering the regime in an absurdly positive way, the autocrat's propaganda apparatus signals that his capacity for violence is so unconstrained that he has no need to curry popular support. He has no need to persuade citizens of the regime's merits.

This is propaganda as domination, and its chief feature is absurdity. It was documented by Wedeen (1999) in Hafez al-Assad's Syria, by Arendt (1951) in the Soviet Union, and by Huang (2015*a*) in contemporary China. By broadcasting propaganda that everyone knows to be false, the autocrat makes his power – his capacity for violence – common knowledge among citizens.

### 1.3.4 Why Electoral Constraints Matter

This framework helps us understand why different autocrats employ different propaganda strategies. Where electoral constraints are relatively binding, autocrats are forced to curry some amount of

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<sup>47</sup>Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006), Gehlbach and Sonin (2014), Yu (2019).

<sup>48</sup>Rozenas and Stukal (2018), Rosenfeld, Tertychnaya and Watanabe (2018).

<sup>49</sup>Little (2017).

<sup>50</sup>Truex (2019).

popular support to compensate for their more limited potential for fraud and violence. In turn, autocrats are forced to govern in the public interest *sometimes*. This creates an opportunity. Autocrats can exploit the fact that they sometimes govern in the public interest to foster uncertainty in the minds of citizens when they do not. Here, autocrats employ propaganda to persuade citizens of regime merits. To be persuasive, however, propaganda apparatuses need credibility, which requires conceding bad news and policy failures. Autocrats must employ a propaganda strategy that requires them to concede damaging facts to persuade citizens of useful fictions. To be clear, these concessions are potentially costly, as Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009) and Rozenas and Stukal (2018) observe. These concessions help create common knowledge among citizens about the government’s policy failures, which provide a foundation for collective action. But conceding bad news is imperative if propaganda is to have any hope of shaping citizens’ beliefs.

Where autocrats confront no electoral constraints – where autocrats can fully secure themselves with repression – propaganda serves to make this common knowledge. By forcing citizens to consume content that everyone knows to be false, autocrats signal to citizens that the regime is so unconstrained – its capacity for violence so unlimited – that the regime has no need to curry popular support. Its hold on power rests not on their assent, but on their submission, which is induced by the threat of violence. Propaganda derives its power from its absurdity.

At this book’s core is a paradox. The autocrats who most need propaganda – who are forced to seek public support by the relatively binding electoral institutions they confront – are most constrained in their ability to deploy it. They must deploy it most artfully.

## 1.4 Data, Empirical Approach, and Key Findings

In Parts II and III of the book, we use this theory to explain the substance of propaganda across the world’s autocracies. In Part IV, we study the effect of propaganda on collective action across the world’s autocracies. Table 1.1 presents a summary of our theory’s observable implications by chapter, which we discuss below. Our theory has implications for the nature of pro-regime propaganda, coverage of the regime’s opponents, and the narratives that constitute the first draft of a country’s history. It also has implications for what propaganda apparatuses tell citizens about the international community, the regime’s engagement with it, and the timing and substance of propaganda campaigns.

### 1.4.1 A Global Dataset of Autocratic Propaganda

This book draws on the first global dataset of autocratic propaganda, which we introduce in Chapter 3. Our collection of state-run newspapers contains nearly eight million unique articles from 70 countries in six major languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. By population, our dataset encompasses a set of countries that represents 93% of all humans who live

under autocracy. As we discuss in Section 1.5, the early 21st century has changed autocratic politics in several ways, including one that makes this book possible: The vast majority of the world’s autocrats make their propaganda newspapers freely available online, often with extensive historical archives. Propaganda is most useful when consumed, after all, and the digital analog to subsidized newsprint appears to be a freely available online archive.

After collecting this propaganda, we measured its content. We employed computational techniques to identify the topics of each article: the economy, public goods, electoral politics, foreign policy, international news, sports, and some two dozen others. We also measured the number of references in each article to the autocrat and ruling party, as well as to the political opposition. This required constructing day-level rosters for each country in our sample. For the opposition, these rosters include every candidate who competed in a national election, the senior leaders of every party that competed in a legislative election, political dissidents, political prisoners, and civil society activists. For the autocrat and ruling party, these rosters include an autocrat’s various honorifics. In total, our rosters contain some 10,000 executive and opposition identifiers. Our computational techniques identified these references with accuracy rates of around 90%.

We measure the valence of propaganda with dictionary based semantic analysis. The key idea is that some words have an intrinsic valence: some positive or negative sentiment. We use techniques from computational linguistics to measure the aggregate valence of each propaganda article, as well as the words immediately surrounding each reference to the autocrat, ruling party, and political opposition. The result is an article-level dataset that records the rate and valence of pro-regime coverage, the rate and valence of opposition coverage, the range of topics each article covers, and each article’s aggregate valence. This conception of propaganda – as spin, not lies – accords with how scholars and practitioners have long understood it.<sup>51</sup> Critically, since our dataset distinguishes between the frequency of regime coverage and its valence, we make no assumption that the frequency of regime coverage is a proxy for its valence, as do Qin, Strömberg and Wu (2018). We regard this as a hypothesis to be tested, not assumed.

This dataset lets us test our theory with a range of statistical tools, but it also creates a dilemma: How can our measures of propaganda be intuitively scaled? We resolve this in two steps. As a baseline for comparison, our dataset includes state-affiliated newspapers from democracies. Many of these newspapers are holdovers from a previous autocratic regime and widely credited for their journalistic integrity. This lets us measure differences in bias: how much more effusive pro-regime propaganda is in some autocracy relative to democracies. We then situate these differences in bias in a context that many readers intuitively understand: how Fox News covers Republicans relative to Democrats. We measure the valence difference between these two, and we refer to it as our Fox News index.<sup>52</sup> This index also provides a measure of what amount of bias is persuasive and what

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<sup>51</sup>Doob (1935), Ellul (1973), Chomsky and Herman (1988), Bogart (1995), Jowett and O’Donnell (2012), Welch (2014), Stanley (2015), Van Herpen (2016).

<sup>52</sup>This helps us overcome a problem that, Groeling (2013) observes, is intrinsic to empirical studies of propaganda:

amount is so extreme that it invalidates itself. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) show that exposure to Fox News persuaded viewers to vote Republican in the 2000 presidential election, and Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) find its effect was even stronger in the 2008 presidential election. Ash and Galletta (2019) show that Fox News exposure leads to more conservative local policy, such as lower taxes and less redistribution. By situating propaganda apparatuses in the context of Fox News, we distinguish content that aims to persuade from that which is absurd.

Table 1.1: Our theory’s observable implications by chapter

Unconstrained Autocracies	Constrained Autocracies
<i>Chapter 4: The Politics of Pro-Regime Propaganda</i> Absurdly positive.	Honest propaganda. Relatively neutral, concedes failures.
<i>Chapter 5: Narrating the Domestic</i> Absurdly positive economic coverage. Covers democracy as a principle. Neutral references to a general, unnamed opposition. Sports coverage includes absurd claims about regime engagement.	Concedes economic challenges, but highlights efforts to address them. Covers electoral politics. Neutral references to specific opposition leaders. Sports coverage intended to attract readers.
<i>Chapter 6: Narrating the World</i> Critical coverage of comparison set countries, with sensitive topics selectively omitted. Advertises immunity from international pressure.	Critical coverage of comparison set countries, with sensitive topics selectively omitted. Partnership with international allies to advance the national interest.
<i>Chapter 7: Threatening Citizens with Violence</i> Occasional, especially around focal moments for popular protest.	Uncommon and reserved for profound crises.
<i>Chapter 8: The Propagandist’s Dilemma</i> Propaganda spikes around the election, intended to discourage protest by intimidating.	Build credibility to manipulate citizen beliefs during election seasons.
<i>Chapter 9: Memory and Forgetting</i> Propaganda spikes around political focal moments, save those that recall regime crimes, which are targeted for censorship.	

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the “absence of suitable baselines against which to assess bias.”

### 1.4.2 Pro-Regime Propaganda and Narrative Subtleties

In Chapter 4, we probe the politics of pro-regime propaganda. Using a series of statistical techniques, we show that pro-regime propaganda in electorally constrained autocracies is about as positive as Fox News’s coverage of Republicans. By contrast, where autocrats are totally unconstrained, pro-regime propaganda is roughly four times more positive than the difference between Fox News’s coverage Republicans relative to Democrats. As robustness checks, we exploit the propaganda records of two countries for which we have data that extend back decades: Gabon and China. When the Berlin Wall fell and the Third Wave of Democracy forced President Omar Bongo to concede a series of liberalizing reforms, his propaganda strategy changed as our theory predicts. We observe no such change in China, where the Third Wave of Democracy occasioned no such reforms. Our data let us write a history of Chinese propaganda, which, we find, is driven by politics, not economics or access to information. With Xi Jinping poised to rule indefinitely, CCP propaganda is now more effusive than any point since the Cultural Revolution. [ADD SURVEY EXPERIMENT HERE]

Propaganda is more than just the rate and valence of regime coverage. It is also about *narratives*: the topics covered and omitted, and the account of current events that constitutes history’s first draft. These narratives are the focus of Chapters 5 and 6. Five issue areas, we find, account for 80% of propaganda content: the economy and public goods provision; electoral politics, democracy, and the political opposition; sports; international news; and international engagement. Chapter 5 focuses on the first three, all domestic. Chapter 6 focuses on the last two, both international. To capture the subtleties of propaganda narratives, we adapt a measure of semantic distinctiveness from computational linguistics. The key idea is that, across any two corpora of documents, words that are common to both are uninformative. These common words generally include conjugations of the verb “to be,” question words like “who” and “where,” and other building blocks of speech. Similarly, across any two corpora of documents, words that are uncommon to both are also uninformative. These words are generally peculiarities. Words that are common in one corpora but uncommon in another are *distinctive*. They convey something meaningful about content in one corpora relative to another. Semantic distinctiveness is useful for capturing the subtleties embedded within millions of propaganda articles, for it lets the data speak freely.

In Chapter 5, this empirical strategy yields a range of novel insights. In the absence of electoral constraints, propaganda apparatuses loudly trumpet the regime’s democratic credentials, yet omit the stuff of democratic politics: electoral campaigns and the opposition. They cover a general, unnamed “opposition” rather than the actual opposition, which, of course, would undermine absurd claims of universal support and potentially help citizens coordinate around particular protest leaders. They cast the autocrat as the champion of national sports teams. We observe none of these tactics where autocrats confront electoral constraints, but neither do we observe them systematically denigrating their opposition rivals. Doing so, after all, would undermine claims of credibility.

Rather, electorally constrained autocrats acknowledge policy failures: fuel crises, vaccine shortages, and persistently high infant mortality rates. They acknowledge the government has failed to adequately invest in the country's athletes.

Citizens generally know less about international news than domestic conditions. As a result, international news propaganda is analytically distinct from its domestic counterpart. First, recall that absurd propaganda requires common knowledge of the possible: a shared sense among citizens for what claims are absurd. This condition is easily satisfied for domestic affairs, but not for international news. Second, the constraints on honest propaganda are weaker, and so propaganda apparatuses can be more critical in their coverage about international news without undermining their reputations for credibility. Theoretically, these two forces render international news propaganda across autocracies more similar than domestic propaganda. Where electoral constraints are binding, propaganda apparatuses can be more critical without undermining their credibility. In the absence of electoral constraints, propaganda apparatuses have no access to absurd propaganda, for what constitutes absurdity is unclear. Chapter 6 documents two tactics in international news propaganda that are common across autocracies: selective coverage and comparison sets. The former entails omitting events that might inspire protests. The latter entails criticism of the countries against which citizens judge their own.

In Chapter 6, we expand our methodological approach to include the tools of network analysis. We combine our global dataset with a paired comparison of Russia and China, the two most geopolitically important autocracies. Their international news coverage, we show, is dominated by the United States, and is critical but sophisticated. We record a range of information about each international news article: the countries and international institutions referenced, and the range of topics covered. We treat these entities as nodes in a network, and the number of articles in which they co-occur as edges among them. The result is a set of weighted network graphs that visualize their propaganda narratives. These network graphs yield a range of observations, including one of historical importance. The Russian propaganda apparatus uses Donald Trump as a tool to vindicate its longstanding international narrative: about the impending collapse of the European Union, the prevalence of terrorism, the political allegiances of Crimeans, the misadventures of America's foreign policy, and the shortcomings of American democracy. The Chinese propaganda apparatus is less enamored with Trump, but covers the same issues: the corruption of American democracy by special interests, including the National Rifle Association, which is partly responsible for America's gun violence epidemic.

However similar international news narratives are, Chapter 6 finds striking differences in how propaganda apparatuses across autocracies cover their international engagements. We again combine cross-country regressions with a series of paired comparisons. The first pairs Russia and China. The second pairs Congo and Uzbekistan; each government has a close relationship with the CCP and was recently visited by former US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, who was suspected by his own Congressional allies of taking money from Vladimir Putin. Where electoral constraints are

binding, we find, propaganda apparatuses emphasize the regime’s pursuit of the national interest: their efforts to partner with the international community to advance living conditions or fight terrorism. By contrast, in the absence of electoral constraints, propaganda apparatuses emphasize the regime’s immunity from international pressure, either because the world’s Great Powers hold the regime in high esteem or because, as in China, the regime is so powerful that it is reshaping the international order. Indeed, we show that CCP propaganda is narrating a new “hub and spoke” international order, with the CCP at its center and “national sovereignty” – rather than human rights – as its key principle.

Our theory regards absurd propaganda as implicitly threatening, intended to signal to citizens the regime’s capacity for violence and to make this capacity common knowledge. Chapter 7 explores whether autocrats use their propaganda apparatuses to issue *explicit* threats of violence. These threats, our field research in China and Congo taught us, are often issued via codewords that are sensitive in one country but innocuous elsewhere. These codewords trigger painful historical memories, which recall the regime’s capacity for violence. But they are costly as well. Threatening citizens with violence makes persuading them of the regime’s merits more difficult, and may endow certain moments or actions with even more popular salience. Accordingly, using a series of paired comparisons, we show that propaganda-based threats are more common in the absence of electoral constraints. Even as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was losing power in Tunisia, for instance, his *La Presse* propaganda newspaper chose to concede citizen frustrations and emphasize the government’s determination to do better, rather than advertise the military’s loyalty, training, and technological prowess, all routinely cited during the succession crisis in Uzbekistan and the Jasmine Movement in China. We find that Cameroon’s Paul Biya issues threats in English, but not in French; his political in-group is francophone, his out-group anglophone.

### 1.4.3 Understanding Calendars of Propaganda

Chapters 4 through 7 document, among other things, how propaganda apparatuses in constrained autocracies seek credibility. They do so, our theory makes clear, to spend it: to persuade citizens of useful fictions. Chapter 8 studies the propaganda campaigns that characterize their efforts to do so. Where autocrats confront at least somewhat binding electoral constraints, election seasons are critical to the autocrat’s survival. They offer citizens an opportunity to vote against him and a focal moment for citizens to protest. These electoral propaganda campaigns are critical for regime survival, yet, precisely because they recur, are easiest for citizens to discount. We refer to this tension as the propagandist’s dilemma, and it is acute where autocrats confront relatively binding electoral constraints. To understand how autocrats manage the propagandist’s dilemma, we combine our data with field research in Congo. These propaganda campaigns, we find, begin months before election day, slowly build, and attempt to simultaneously cast the electoral outcome as uncertain and yet prepare citizens to accept the autocrat’s “legitimate” victory. Where autocrats



confront no electoral constraints, by contrast, the propaganda spike occurs immediately before election day, and in some cases the post-election spike is even greater.

In the absence of electoral constraints, the chief moments of political tension are often the anniversaries of a regime’s crimes against its citizens. In Chapter 9, we combine our data with field research in China to understand how propaganda apparatuses respond. Theoretically, we identify a trade-off. Propaganda spikes intended to threaten citizens are useful to deter protest. But they also call attention to events or memories that the regime might prefer its citizens forget. How do the most repressive governments resolve the tension between propaganda strategies that keep memories alive and censorship strategies that attempt to force forgetting? We emphasize three forces: whether some politically sensitive moment implicates the regime in historical crimes, whether the moment has any tangible manifestation in the present, and whether forgetting is even possible. The first conditions the value of forgetting to the regime; the second and third condition its plausibility. The CCP, we find, goes to extraordinary lengths to scrub the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements from the public consciousness, and so reserves propaganda spikes for major political events and the anniversaries of failed ethnic separatist movements.

There is one exception to this: one pro-democracy anniversary that is so powerful that the CCP knows citizens will not forget. On June 4, 1989, the CCP massacred between 3,000 and 10,000 citizens in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, who had spent weeks demanding democratic reforms. Two decades later and thousands of miles away, the marginalized ethnic Uygher community in Xinjiang region staged a 10,000 person protest, known now as the Xinjiang Uprising of 2009. The CCP’s subsequent crackdown killed hundreds, injured thousands, and culminated in a network of detention centers that now holds between 10% and 30% of China’s 11 million Uyghers. Since then, on each anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre, the CCP has used its propaganda apparatus to remind Beijing’s urban class of its brutal campaign of repression against ethnic Uyghers. Chapter 9 suggests that the CCP’s ethnic violence in Xinjiang may, in part, have its origins in Beijing: in the CCP’s incentives to ensure the urban elite does not again demand change. [ADD SURVEY EXPERIMENT HERE]

#### 1.4.4 The Effects of Propaganda on Collective Action

The broader question, of course, is whether any of this matters. Does propaganda work? Using a range of natural experiments, scholars have found evidence that propaganda can shape citizens’ beliefs about repressive governments.<sup>53</sup> Chapters 10 and 11 use our measures of propaganda to understand its effect on protests across the world’s autocracies.

In Chapter 10, we probe the effects of pro-regime propaganda. This is complicated by the

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<sup>53</sup>Adena et al. (2015), Yanagizawa-Drott (2014), Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya (2011), White, Oates and McAllister (2005), Huang (2015*a*), Boas and Hidalgo (2011), McMillan and Zoido (2004), Greene (2011), Lawson and McCann (2005), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006), Gentzkow (2005), González and Prem (2018). On media effects in democracies, see Strömberg (2015), Hayes and Lawless (2015), Arceneaux et al. (2016), Wang (2020).

fact that autocrats employ propaganda strategically. We confront two forms of selection bias. First, the regimes in which propaganda is employed frequently may be systematically different than those in which it is not, and in ways that are correlated with the rate of collective action. We refer to this as “unit selection bias,” and it may occur for a variety of reasons. Most obviously, the regimes most likely to employ propaganda may exert particularly strong control over their countries’ media environments, and this degree of control could be associated with higher or lower levels of collective action. Second, authoritarian regimes employ propaganda differently at different times of year, and these moments may be systematically associated with collective action. We refer to this as “temporal selection bias,” and it too may emerge for a variety of reasons. The rate of propaganda may rise immediately before elections, when autocrats have a particularly strong incentive to manipulate the beliefs of their citizens. Additionally, autocratic propaganda apparatuses may provide more positive coverage when there is more genuinely good news: when the unemployment rate is lower or when the economy grows more quickly. If positive coverage indicates genuinely good news rather than pro-regime propaganda – and citizens are then less likely to protest – then an estimated relationship between propaganda and protest will be spurious.

To accommodate unit selection bias, we employ estimating equations with country-level fixed effects. In so doing, we ask how *changes* in the volume of propaganda on day  $t - 1$  condition the rate of collective action on day  $t$ . To accommodate temporal selection bias, we control for a range of time variant features that may condition whether autocrat  $i$  employs propaganda on a given day or during a given year: whether day  $t$  falls during an election season or on election day itself, country  $i$ ’s history of political instability up to day  $t$ , the rate of internet access, as well as a range of economic measures that reflect the living conditions of citizens. We control for the daily amount of genuinely positive developments in country  $i$  by measuring the amount of positive coverage it receives in the world’s newspapers of record. We also control for references to country  $i$ ’s political opposition, who may attempt to mobilize unrest. We find that pro-regime propaganda is associated with a substantively meaningful reduction in the rate of popular protest. By increasing the level of pro-regime propaganda by one standard deviation, contemporary autocrats have reduced the odds of protest the following day by 11.5%. This effect is relatively durable. Depending on the form of the decay function, the half-life of the effect is between two and five days. One month later, very little of the initial effect still persists. This temporal signature is strikingly consistent with political messaging in American politics.<sup>54</sup> In short, propaganda in autocracies appears to condition collective action much as campaign advertisements in democracies condition voting.

Chapter 11, we focus on the effects of propaganda-based threats of repression. Again, we confront the possibility of selection bias. Repressive governments may be more likely to threaten citizens with repression during politically sensitive moments, and in response to protests on day  $t - 1$ . This creates two competing effects on protests: a negative effect due to the threat, and

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<sup>54</sup>Hill et al. (2013).

a positive effect due to tensions that compelled the threat. The calendar of popular protest in contemporary China, which we uncover in Chapter 7, suggests a novel identification strategy. We employ an instrumental variables (IV) estimator that rests on two features of China’s political geography. First, propaganda in the *Workers’ Daily* is set at the national level, but occasionally responds to local conditions, which are salient in one province but unknown in other provinces. As a result, citizens in one province are occasionally “treated” with propaganda content that is intended for citizens in geographically and culturally distant provinces. Second, because China is ethnically diverse and geographically sprawling, the ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang that drive propaganda-based threats are salient only in those regions, and effectively unknown elsewhere. We argue that ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang plausibly condition protest rates in *geographically and culturally distant provinces* only through the propaganda-based threats that the regime issues via the propaganda apparatus.

We present a range of evidence that this exclusion restriction is plausible: a nationally representative survey, an analysis of protest and repression by day and location, and a description of the language that protesters employ. As a further precaution, we exclude nine provinces where the exclusion restriction is mostly likely to be violated, which nonetheless leaves us with a sample that includes 88.5% of Chinese citizens. We find that propaganda-based threats have a plausibly causal effect on protest levels outside the nine provinces we drop. We employ Conley, Hansen and Rossi (2012)’s sensitivity analysis to show that these IV estimates are robust to non-trivial violations of the exclusion restriction.

## 1.5 Beliefs, Nominally Democratic Institutions, and Autocratic Politics

This book is about autocratic propaganda. More broadly, however, it is about the ongoing struggle between autocrats and citizens, the political institutions that mediate it, and how the international community can support citizens who wage it. Many scholars regard nominally democratic institutions as forces of stability and regime survival as secured through patronage and repression. Our approach is different. Politics in the world’s autocracies have undergone fundamental changes since the Berlin Wall fell. The rate of elite coups has declined, popular protests have emerged as the chief threat to autocratic survival, and, with 80% of the world’s autocrats governing with nominally democratic institutions, there is now less institutional variation in the world’s autocracies than perhaps ever before.

These changes inform our approach to autocratic politics. We view citizens’ beliefs as the central battlefield on which the struggle for political change is waged and nominally democratic institutions as constraints that autocrats struggle to loosen. Autocrats wage this battle with a range of tools, propaganda chief among them, but their propaganda strategies are conditioned by

their political institutions. In privileging citizens' beliefs as key to autocratic survival, we return to how scholars understood it for much of the 20th century. In treating nominally democratic institutions as constraints that autocrats attempt to loosen, this book joins a growing literature that suggests these institutions are not as stabilizing as scholars once thought.<sup>55</sup> This is among the book's key implications: While nominally democratic institutions may yield some benefits to the world's autocrats, electoral constraints also force autocrats to wage the battle for their citizens' beliefs from a position of weakness.

### 1.5.1 Autocracy, its Problems, and How to Solve Them

Autocracy has been the most common form of government in human history,<sup>56</sup> and so scholars have long sought to understand its internal dynamics. These understandings have evolved over time, often in ways that reflect prevailing geopolitical conditions.

With the United States locked in a Cold War against the Soviet Union, in the mid-20th century scholars probed how totalitarianism was distinctive. All autocracies were repressive, scholars observed, but totalitarianism assaulted citizens' beliefs with the tools of modern technology. Buchheim (1968) described this assault with the same disturbing metaphor that Chinese citizens reserve for the *People's Daily*: "the creeping rape of man by the perversion of his thoughts." In the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt (1951) wrote about the cognitive scars this assault leaves on citizens:

The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lie will now be accepted as truth and truth be defamed as a lie, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.

This cognitive assault was enshrined in the era's literature. In *The Power of the Powerless*, Vaclav Havel (1978, 9) described "life in the system" as "permeated with hypocrisy and lies," where "banning independent thought becomes the most scientific of world views." In *Life is Elsewhere*, Milan Kundera described the era as when "the poet" – the propagandist, that is – "reigned along with the executioner."

Whether citizens' beliefs were actually reshaped was a matter of debate. Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956) registered their skepticism, as did Kirkpatrick (1981, 123):

Have they managed to reform human consciousness? Have they managed to educate Soviet citizens so that they would freely choose to live according to the norms of Soviet culture *if the constraints of coercion were removed*? The answer of course is that we do not know.

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<sup>55</sup>Carothers (2018), Jang and Huang (2019), Reuter and Szakonyi (2019), Meng (2020).

<sup>56</sup>Tullock (1987), Wintrobe (1998), Svoboda (2012).

The Soviet Union’s collapse effectively answered the question, and scholars responded by treating autocratic politics as chiefly about repression. “What reproduces consent is the threat of force,” Przeworski (1986, 51) observed, “and short of moments of true desperation this threat is sufficient.” Quite appropriately, repression remains central to the study of autocracy. Scholars have sought to understand its effects on those who experience it,<sup>57</sup> how political institutions and modern communication technologies condition it,<sup>58</sup> whether the international community can prevent it,<sup>59</sup> and how bureaucracies are organized to wield it.<sup>60</sup> Dictators have accomplices, of course, and so scholars have equally continued to seek the non-coercive foundations of autocratic survival, patronage chief among them.<sup>61</sup>

In the early 2000s, scholars advanced our understanding of autocratic politics in two ways. First, scholars more sharply defined the threats to autocratic survival. Autocrats, in Svoboda (2012)’s formulation, must secure the cooperation of a ruling elite and the acquiescence of citizens. These groups threaten autocrats in different ways: elites via coup, citizens via revolution. Tullock (1987) argued that elite coups were more threatening than popular revolutions, Geddes (2005) agreed, and Svoboda (2009) demonstrated it empirically for the post-World War II period.<sup>62</sup> Second, scholars identified another tool of autocratic politics: institutions, especially robust political parties.<sup>63</sup> By providing an “institutional setting that generates political power and long-term security,” Brownlee (2007) writes, “ruling parties ...bridle elite ambitions and bind together otherwise fractious coalitions.” Similarly, for Slater (2010), “ruling parties ...[prevent] elite defection” by creating a “political wilderness” with no “alternative routes to the political summit.” These dominant parties emerge, Reuter (2017) finds, where the autocrat and the elite need each other to secure power.<sup>64</sup>

Other scholars, meanwhile, argued that nominally democratic institutions are equally stabilizing. These institutions, the arguments generally go, enable autocrats to credibly commit to revenue sharing agreements with regime insiders or policy compromises with other prominent fig-

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<sup>57</sup>Escribà-Folch (2013), Bautista (2016), Bautista et al. (2018), Young (2018), Amat (2019), Xue and Koyama (N.d.), Desposato, Wang and Wu (2019).

<sup>58</sup>Davenport (2006, 2007*b,a*), Bhasin and Gandhi (2013), Hill and Jones (2014), Frantz and Kendall-Taylor (2014), Christensen and Garfias (2018), Gohdes (2019).

<sup>59</sup>Escribà-Folch and Wright (2015), Carnegie and Marinov (2017), Carter (2016*a*).

<sup>60</sup>Policzer (2009), Sassoon (2012), Hassan (2016), Blaydes (2018), Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018), Shen-Bayh (2018), Thomson (2019).

<sup>61</sup>Wintrobe (1998), Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), Acemoglu, Robinson and Verdier (2004), Padro i Miquel (2007), Arriola (2009), Albertus (2015), Roessler (2016), Albertus, Fenner and Slater (2018).

<sup>62</sup>Relatedly, O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986, 19) traced successful revolutions to splits within the ruling regime: “There is no transition whose beginning is not a consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the regime itself, principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hard-liners and soft-liners.”

<sup>63</sup>Brownlee (2007), Slater (2010), Svoboda (2012).

<sup>64</sup>Boix and Svoboda (2013) make a related argument about power balances, but are more agnostic about the form that the resulting institutions take. Note that Meng (2019) provides evidence that strong ruling parties are much rarer than typically assumed, suggesting that some of the causal force attributed to them may be driven, in part, by Soviet support during the Cold War.

ures.<sup>65</sup> Elections may enable autocrats to equitably distribute regime patronage,<sup>66</sup> locate pockets of popular discontent,<sup>67</sup> and identify effective party cadres.<sup>68</sup> In locating the origins of autocratic survival in nominally democratic institutions, scholars turned a longstanding assumption on its head. If nominally democratic institutions are actually sources of autocratic stability, then, by largely requiring them in exchange for development aid and debt relief, Western governments have rendered the world’s autocrats more secure, not less. Lust-Okar (2006) put it simply: “The logic of authoritarian elections should lead us to question the value of pressing for, and applauding, the introduction of elections in authoritarian regimes.”<sup>69</sup>

### 1.5.2 Autocratic Politics in the Early 21st Century

In the early 21st century, the relative salience of Svoboda (2012)’s two problems of autocratic rule changed, as did the relative accessibility of the tools with which autocrats solve them. These changes have made understanding autocratic propaganda more critical than any point since the mid-20th century. The Berlin Wall’s collapse – and, with it, America’s ascension to global hegemony – had three related consequences for the world’s autocrats. First, most were forced to adopt nominally democratic institutions as a final effort to placate frustrated citizens. Their protests were driven by rising food prices, inspiration from revolutions abroad, and signals from Western democracies that development aid would be tied to democratic reforms. Since then, the international community has generally required nominally democratic institutions in exchange for development aid and debt relief.<sup>70</sup> With a few notable exceptions – China among them – autocrats no longer have easy access to the single party regimes that helped stabilize their 20th century predecessors.

Second, the regular elections occasioned by nominally democratic institutions force autocrats to subject themselves to recurring opportunities for collective action.<sup>71</sup> During election seasons, citizens are engaged in politics and aware of their neighbors’ discontent.<sup>72</sup> Opposition leaders coordinate protests and alert citizens to electoral fraud.<sup>73</sup> By affirming the possibility of a post-regime future, elections decrease the costs to regime elites of defecting from the coalition and joining the opposition.<sup>74</sup> Hale (2005) concludes that revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine

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<sup>65</sup>Magaloni (2006, 2008), Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), Gandhi (2008), Wright (2008), and Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018).

<sup>66</sup>Lust-Okar (2006), Blaydes (2008).

<sup>67</sup>Ames (1970), Magaloni (2006), Brownlee (2007), Blaydes (2008), Cox (2009), and Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018).

<sup>68</sup>Birney (2007), and Blaydes (2008).

<sup>69</sup>Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) and Pepinsky (2014) provide an excellent overview of existing research.

<sup>70</sup>Bratton and van de Walle (1997), van de Walle (2001), Dunning (2004), Levitsky and Way (2010), Marinov and Goemans (2014).

<sup>71</sup>Olson (1977), Granovetter (1978), DeNardo (1985), Tullock (1987), Przeworski (2006).

<sup>72</sup>Kuran (1991), Tucker (2007), Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland (2015).

<sup>73</sup>Beissinger (2002), Javeline (2003), McFaul (2005), Radnitz (2010), Bunce and Wolchik (2011), Fearon (2011).

<sup>74</sup>Reuter and Szakonyi (2019).

succeeded, in part, because security officials refused to suppress opposition leaders who “might be the authorities of the future.” Elite defections helped end Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade’s ambitions for his son, catalyzed the Burkinabé Revolution of October 2014, and gave rise to Jean Ping’s candidacy against Gabonese President Ali Ben Bongo in 2016. As a result, as the left panel of Figure 1.2 illustrates, the daily rate of protest across autocracies rises steadily as election day approaches, and on election day itself is three times greater than any other day of the year.<sup>75</sup> These protests have consequences. In post-Cold War Africa, Aidt and Leon (2015) find, as the number of annual protests rises, so too does the probability of democratic change.

Third, popular protests now constitute the chief threat to autocratic survival, as the right panel of Figure 1.2 makes clear. Marinov and Goemans (2014) locate the decline of the coup in the same forces that compelled the rise of nominally democratic institutions. Pressured by Western donors to quickly transfer power to elected governments, would-be coup plotters view coups as less attractive than they once did. Western pressure appears to have amplified threats from the street by making repression costly. Carnegie and Marinov (2017), for instance, find that positive conditionality from the European Union has reduced human rights violations. Carter (2016*b*) finds that Africa’s autocrats were less likely to employ violence against citizens during debt relief negotiations with the Bretton Woods institutions, and, recognizing this, their citizens have been more likely to protest. A range of scholars have found that development aid sustained and international pressure can foster political liberalization.<sup>76</sup>

The threat of popular protest has been reinforced by modern communications technologies, which enable citizens to share information about regime crimes, organize mass protests, and ultimately topple governments. Just before the Arab Spring, Diamond (2010) dubbed them liberation technologies. Afterwards, Steinert-Threlkeld et al. (2015) and Howard and Hussain (2011, 2013) found that they were critical to its success. Manacorda and Tesei (2016) and Christensen and Garfias (2018) measured their effects around the world. In the most closed autocracies, protests are notoriously difficult for scholars to record for posterity. But, again, the available evidence suggests that the rate of protest is rising. The CCP government records protests across China to locate pockets of discontent and identify local governments that fail to curb it. The government made these data public until 2005, when the protest rate rose so high that it made the depth of popular frustration common knowledge among citizens.

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<sup>75</sup>We draw protest data from the Social Conflict in Africa Dataset, introduced by Salehyan et al. (2012).

<sup>76</sup>Dunning (2004), Brown (2005), Hafner-Burton (2008), Bearce and Tirone (2010), Kersting and Kelly (2014), Dietrich and Wright (2014), and Escribà-Folch and Wright (2015).

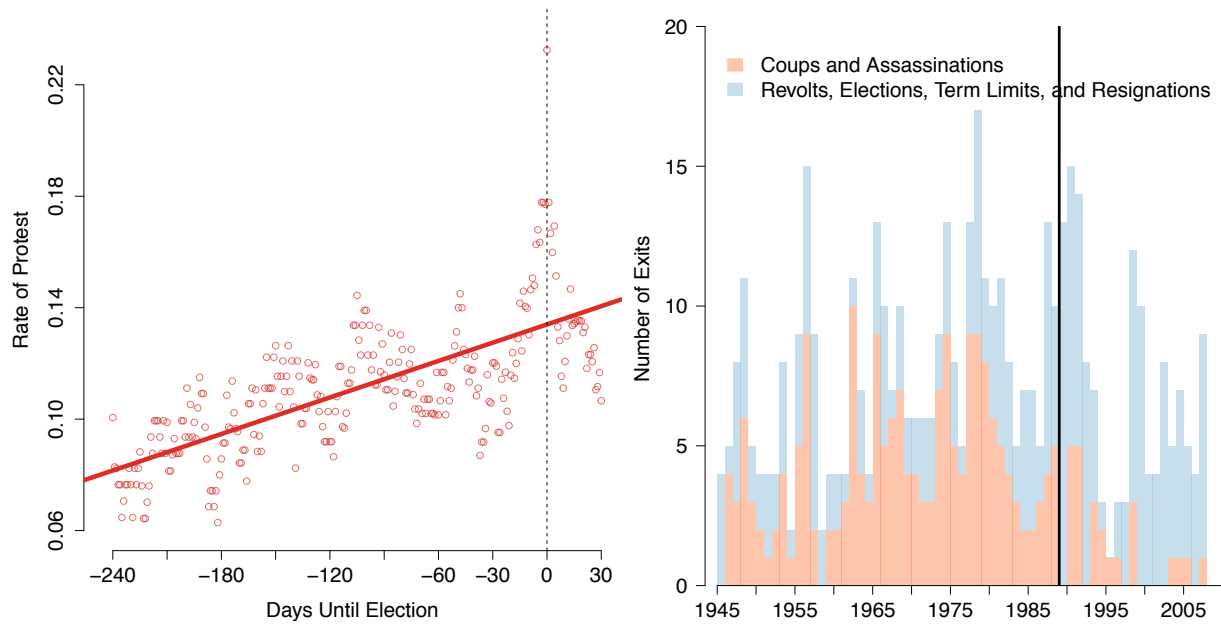


Figure 1.2: The left panel records the daily rate of protest across Africa’s autocracies as elections approach. The right panel visualizes how the world’s autocrats have lost power since 1945; the Berlin Wall’s collapse is given by the vertical line.

### 1.5.3 Propaganda, Institutions, and the Politics of Belief

As autocratic politics has changed, so too has how scholars study it. With popular protests increasingly the chief threat to autocratic survival,<sup>77</sup> scholars have sought to understand their dynamics: who protests,<sup>78</sup> when,<sup>79</sup> how they organize,<sup>80</sup> which tactics they employ,<sup>81</sup> and which tactics are most effective.<sup>82</sup> Scholars have also sought to understand how the world’s autocrats attempt to censor their citizens’ informational environments,<sup>83</sup> deploy bots to shape social media conversations,<sup>84</sup> and block internet access altogether.<sup>85</sup> Still other scholars have sought to measure propaganda’s

<sup>77</sup>With political institutions increasingly fixed, a separate strand of scholarship has focused on how autocrats use non-institutional strategies to induce elite loyalty. See, for instance, Arriola (2009), Francois, Rainer and Trebbi (2014), Sudduth (2017), Woldense (2018), Meng (2020).

<sup>78</sup>Branch and Mampilly (2015), Brancati (2016), Rosenfeld (2017).

<sup>79</sup>Beissinger (2002, 2007), Tucker (2007), Fearon (2011), Beaulieu (2014), Trejo (2014), Brancati (2016), Carter and Carter (2020*b*).

<sup>80</sup>Diamond (2010), Tufekci and Wilson (2012), Howard and Hussain (2013), Steinert-Threlkeld et al. (2015), Manacorda and Tesei (2016), Christensen and Garfias (2018), Fu (2018).

<sup>81</sup>Chen (2012), Chenoweth and Ulfelder (2015).

<sup>82</sup>Chenoweth and Stephan (2011), Beber, Roessler and Scacco (2014), and Enos, Kaufman and Sands (2017).

<sup>83</sup>King, Pan and Roberts (2013), Guriev and Treisman (2015), Shadmehr and Bernhardt (2015), Qin, Strömberg and Wu (2017), Gallagher and Miller (2019).

<sup>84</sup>King, Pan and Roberts (2017), Munger et al. (2016).

<sup>85</sup>Atabong (2017), Rydzak (2019*b*).



effects. Just as political communication in democracies routinely shapes citizens' beliefs,<sup>86</sup> there is mounting evidence that autocratic propaganda can persuade citizens of regime merits.<sup>87</sup>

Common to much of this scholarship is a conviction that citizens' beliefs are the central battlefield on which the struggle for political change is waged. This conviction – about the power of belief – is how scholars understood autocratic survival for much of the 20th century, before the Soviet Union fell and the institutionalist approach to autocratic survival gained prominence. This conviction compelled the American government to drop “leaflet bombs” over Soviet territory during the Cold War, the African National Congress (ANC) to drop “ideological bombs” over South African townships during the struggle against apartheid, and a young Mao to describe propaganda as the “most important job” facing his insurgent movement. It animated the enduring literature of George Orwell, Vaclav Havel, Milan Kundera, Yan Lianke, and Ma Jian. It was central to Crassweller (1966)'s remarkable account of Rafael Trujillo and Kapuscinski (1989)'s equally remarkable account of Haile Selassie. It was even central to Wintrobe (1998, 20)'s pathbreaking formal models of autocratic politics, before he chose to privilege patronage and repression rather than the power of citizens' beliefs. The “one thing even dictatorial powers cannot give,” Wintrobe wrote, is “the *minds* of their subjects.”<sup>88</sup> In turn, autocrats attempt to shape their citizens' beliefs. They do so with a range of modern technologies, as recent scholarship makes clear: sophisticated censorship operations, social media campaigns, and internet shutdowns.

Perhaps most importantly, however, autocrats employ propaganda. This book is the first to measure and explain the dramatic variation in propaganda across autocracies. We trace the origins of divergent propaganda strategies across autocracies to differences in electoral constraints. In so doing, this book challenges how scholars understand the forces that condition media bias. Joseph Pulitzer located the origins of journalistic freedom in economics. “Advertising means money,”

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<sup>86</sup>Zaller (1992); Jentleson (1992); Brody (1991); Zaller and Chiu (2000); Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston (2006); Behr and Iyengar (1985); Cohen (1995); Entman (1993); Iyengar and Valentino (2000); Rahn (1993); Cohen (2003); Bullock (2011). Without elite cues, the relationship between ideological self identification and policy preferences is weak (Malka and Lelkes 2010; Popp and Rudolph 2011). Moreover, in the presence of media disagreement, citizens are more skeptical about leader statements (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Larson 2000; Kuypers 1997; Graber 2002; Paletz 2002; Mueller 1973; Lee 1977; Brody 1991; Rahn 1993; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Groeling and Baum 2008; Berinsky 2007). For a review, see Chong and Druckman (2007). The effects of persuasive communication quickly decay, which helps explain why political advertisements are most frequent in the weeks before an election (Cook and Flay 1978; Hill et al. 2013; Gerber et al. 2011). Research on the influence of casualty reports on war support reaches similar conclusions (Hayes and Myers 2009; Althaus, Bramlett and Gimpel 2012; Sides and Vavreck 2013).

<sup>87</sup>Adena et al. (2015), Yanagizawa-Drott (2014), Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya (2011), White, Oates and McAllister (2005), Huang (2015a), Boas and Hidalgo (2011), McMillan and Zoido (2004), Greene (2011), Lawson and McCann (2005), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006), Gentzkow (2005), González and Prem (2018). On media effects in democracies, see Strömberg (2015), Hayes and Lawless (2015), Arceneaux et al. (2016), Wang (2020).

<sup>88</sup>Italics in the original. Wintrobe added: “The more general problem with ideology as an explanatory variable is simply that we do not understand it very well.”

he observed, “and money means independence.”<sup>89</sup> Many scholars agree. As potential advertising revenues expand, the arguments go, media platforms have incentives to attract more readers, and do so by reporting objectively.<sup>90</sup> In 19th century America, Petrova (2011) shows, areas with larger advertising markets had more politically independent newspapers, which emerged as government watchdogs.<sup>91</sup> Newspaper circulation is associated with better disaster relief in India,<sup>92</sup> more public goods in New Deal America,<sup>93</sup> and less public corruption in late 19th century America.<sup>94</sup> This was all anticipated by Thomas Jefferson, who wrote in 1781: “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

A number of scholars have extended this argument to China, where there has been a huge expansion in the commercially oriented local media market over the past 40 years.<sup>95</sup> Over time, Qin, Strömberg and Wu (2018, 2474) suggest, “economic development [will reduce] audience exposure to propaganda.” Similarly, Guriev and Treisman (2018) argue that “economic modernization, and in particular the spread of higher education,” forces autocrats into a less biased propaganda strategy. If they are right, then the implications are profound, a modernization theory for the Information Age. As economies grow and citizens are better educated, repressive governments will confront powerful incentives to soften the biases in propaganda. With citizens better informed, political reform may well follow.<sup>96</sup> These arguments were anticipated by Inglehart and Welzel (2005, 22,29,46), who described “the causal primacy of socioeconomic development.” “The evolution of mass media and modern information technology,” they argue, “gives people easy access to knowledge, increasing their informational autonomy” and ultimately their capacity to force political change.<sup>97</sup>

Our theory suggests otherwise, for ours is a *political* theory of autocratic propaganda.<sup>98</sup> The chief driver of variation in propaganda – both across countries and over time – is the set of electoral constraints that autocratic governments confront. This book thus advances a different view of nominally democratic institutions in autocracies. We regard them not as forces of stability, but as constraints that autocrats aim to loosen. In 2016 alone, for instance, five of Africa’s autocrats –

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<sup>89</sup>Starr (2004).

<sup>90</sup>Besley and Prat (2006), McMillan and Zoido (2004), Corneo (2006), Gehlbach and Sonin (2014), Tella and Franceschelli (2011), Hamilton (2004), Gentzkow, Glaeser and Goldin (2006), Petrova (2008, 2011, 2012). Relatedly, scholars have also attributed the growth of unbiased media to population growth. See, for example, Besley and Prat (2006), Ellman and Germano (2009), and Gentzkow, Glaeser and Goldin (2006).

<sup>91</sup>For a formal treatment, see Besley and Prat (2006).

<sup>92</sup>Besley and Burgess (2002).

<sup>93</sup>Strömberg (2004).

<sup>94</sup>Gentzkow, Glaeser and Goldin (2006).

<sup>95</sup>See, among others, Lee (1990), Zhao (1998), Lynch (1999).

<sup>96</sup>Pei (1994), Hassid (2015).

<sup>97</sup>See also Inglehart (1997, 205-209), Inglehart and Welzel (2010, 561), Welzel and Inglehart (2009, 136-138), Welzel (2013, 38, 44, 268-269).

<sup>98</sup>Munck (2018) describes Inglehart and Welzel as “[rejecting] the view that political institutions could themselves affect cultural change.” His response, which privileges political institutions as causally primary, anticipates ours.

Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi, Idriss Déby of Chad, Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo, Ali Bongo of Gabon, and Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo – either removed term limits or suspended elections altogether. To be sure, autocrats attempt to use these institutions to their advantage whenever possible: Autocrats “best respond” to their institutional constraints. But there is a profound difference between choosing nominally democratic institutions and making the best of them.

Nominally democratic institutions create new challenges for the world’s autocrats. Regular elections constitute recurrent opportunities for collective action,<sup>99</sup> provide elites with an opportunity to defect from the elite coalition,<sup>100</sup> and enable potential rivals to gain notoriety.<sup>101</sup> This book shows that even weak electoral institutions, such as those confronted by Denis Sassou Nguesso, force autocrats to wage the battle for their citizens’ minds from a position of weakness. To persuade citizens of their regimes’ merits, electorally constrained autocrats must acknowledge policy failures, which are occasionally are damning. As we show in Chapter 5, for instance, Denis Sassou Nguesso was forced to cover a catastrophic fuel shortage, despite presiding over Africa’s fourth leading oil producer. His propaganda apparatus covers malnutrition, infant mortality, and vaccine shortages. These admissions risk confirming citizens’ frustrations and coalescing this frustration into collective action. But admit he must, for his electoral constraints require it.

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<sup>99</sup>See Figure 1.2.

<sup>100</sup>Reuter and Szakonyi (2019).

<sup>101</sup>Jang and Huang (2019).