

THE AUTHORITARIAN WAGER

POLITICAL ACTION AND THE SUDDEN COLLAPSE OF REPRESSION

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THE QUESTION

Explaining outcomes of mass political action:

- **why did East European governments not repress protests when they grew?**
- why did they allow them to grow in the first place?
- why the various different outcomes in Arab Spring?

Governments always repress whenever they can:

Why does the ruling regime choose not to repress even though it could?

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● revolutions (Skocpol 1979)

● political movements (McFadyen 2008)

● political violence (Colman 2003)

● women in China's grassroots movements (Chen 2002)

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● collective action (Coleman 1982)

● mass political protest (Kuran 1985; Tarrow 1998)

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No good theory of repression despite cost/benefit framework (Davenport 2007), but:

- **regime transitions (Acemoglu & Robison 2000; Boix 2003)**
- response to dissident behavior (Moore 2000)
- maximize political survival & term of accommodation (Ritter 2014)

Mobilized dissent assumed \Rightarrow repression reactive

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Downsides to focusing on reactive repression

- **so common that “law of coercive responsiveness” (Davenport 2007)**
- → *but then why does opposition challenge?*
- “mobilization stage” where dissidents decide whether to challenge (Pierskalla 2010; Shadmehr 2014)
- → *but then why does regime not target their coordination capacity*
- “preventive stage” where regime deploys measures against organizing the challenge (Tilly 1978)

Disrupt organization of dissent ⇒ repression preventive

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*Disrupt organization of dissent ⇒ repression **preventive***

THE QUESTION, FOCUSED

Why would government choose to relax preventive repression and permit an organized challenge to the regime?

MODEL FEATURES

Focus on collapse of **preventive** repression

- variation in citizen preference for regime
- uncertainty about these preferences everywhere
- coordination problem & free-riding incentives
- potential for preference falsification
- state choice of level of preventive repression
- structural variation in repressive capacity

Assume repressive apparatus loyal:

- chosen level of preventive repression is implemented
- conflict automatic after relevant citizen choices

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PREVENTIVE STAGE

A ruler chooses level of preventive repression, $k \in (0, 1)$, that any political action must incur. The choice is costless to the ruler, observable by everyone, and immediately effective.

The ruler maximizes the probability of staying in power.

MOBILIZATION STAGE: POLITICAL ACTION GAME

Two citizens, $i \in \{1, 2\}$, with regime preference $t_i \in [0, 1]$ simultaneously choose to oppose ruler (L), abstain (A), or support him (R). Costs of any action depend on repression set by ruler (k).

SQ remains unless opposition without support (ruler falls) or opposition and support (conflict). Conflict is risky (ruler wins with $\pi \in (0, 1)$), costly ($c > 0$), and imposes a targeted penalty on the losing citizen ($\theta > 0$). Expected payoffs:

$$\text{in support : } w(t_i) = \pi t_i + (1 - \pi)(1 - t_i - \theta) - c$$

$$\text{in opposition : } W(t_i) = \pi(t_i - \theta) + (1 - \pi)(1 - t_i) - c$$

with $\bar{w} = w(1) > 0$ (Assumption 1). The payoff matrix is:

	L	A	R
L	$1 - t_1 - k, 1 - t_2 - k$	$1 - t_1 - k, 1 - t_2$	$W(t_1) - k, w(t_2) - k$
A	$1 - t_1, 1 - t_2 - k$	t_1, t_2	$t_1, t_2 - k$
R	$w(t_1) - k, W(t_2) - k$	$t_1 - k, t_2$	$t_1 - k, t_2 - k$

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R	$w(t_1) - k, W(t_2) - k$	$t_1 - k, t_2$	$t_1 - k, t_2 - k$

CPAG EQUILIBRIUM WITH PRIVATE PREFERENCES

NOTATION & PRELIMINARIES

Pure-strategy equilibria must be partitional:

LEMMA (1)

For every $(\lambda_{-i}, \varphi_{-i})$ there exist unique $t_L < 1/2 < t_R$ such that in every equilibrium citizen i opposes if $t_i < t_L$, abstains if $t_i \in [t_L, t_R]$, and supports the ruler if $t_i > t_R$.

The task is to find $(t_L, t_R, \lambda_i, \varphi_i)$ such that $\lambda_i = \Pr(t_i < t_L)$ and $\varphi_i = \Pr(t_i > t_R)$.

We only need to consider whether supporters are active ($t_R \leq 1$):

LEMMA (2)

Regime opponents are active in every equilibrium: $t_L > 0$.

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DESPOTIC EQUILIBRIUM

LEMMA (3)

In the unique *despotic* equilibrium only opponents are active with probability

$$\lambda_D = \frac{3 - \sqrt{1 + 8k}}{4},$$

and everyone else abstains. This equilibrium exists if, and only if, $k \geq k^*$.

Repression level k^* is the minimum that ensures no potential supporter wants to be active despite $\lambda_D > 0$:

$$k^* = \bar{w} h(\bar{w}), \tag{D}$$

where

$$h(\bar{w}) = \frac{3 + \bar{w} - \sqrt{(3 + \bar{w})^2 - 8}}{4} > 0.$$

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ANOCRATIC EQUILIBRIUM

If $k < k^*$, then supporters have an incentive to be active:

LEMMA (4)

In the unique anocratic equilibrium opponents are active with probability $\lambda_A \in (0, 1/2)$, supporters are active with probability $\varphi_A \in (0, 1/2)$, where (λ_A, φ_A) is the unique solution to:

$$\begin{aligned}\lambda &= t_L(\lambda, \varphi) \\ \varphi &= 1 - t_R(\lambda),\end{aligned}$$

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COMPARATIVE STATICS

Repression determines which equilibrium obtains...

PROPOSITION (2)

The political action game with incomplete information has a unique symmetric equilibrium that is anocratic if, and only if, $k < k^$, and despotic otherwise.*

... but affects survival differently in each...

LEMMA (7)

Repression increases the probability of ruler's survival in the despotic equilibrium, $\Omega_D = (1 - \lambda_A)^2$, but decreases it in the anocratic equilibrium, $\Omega_A = (1 - \lambda_A)^2 + 2\lambda_A\varphi_A \times \pi$.

... because it can weaken incentive of supporters to act.

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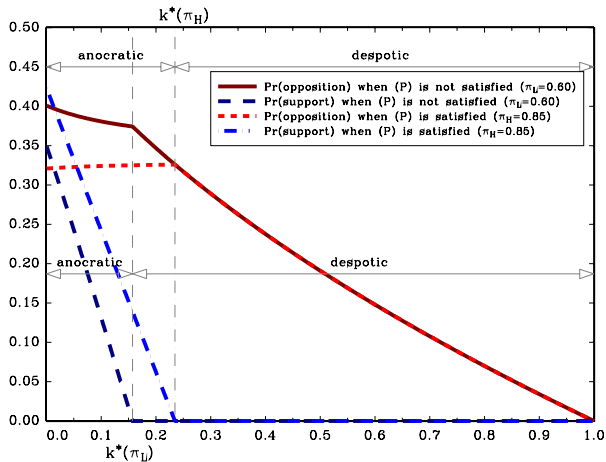
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COMPARATIVE STATICS



Effect of Repression on Public Action

EQUILIBRIUM WITH PRIVATE PREFERENCES

BANG-BANG RESULT

The structural capacity for repression. . .

- $k_L \in (0, k^*)$ denotes the lowest feasible level of repression (close to 0)
- $k_H > k_L$ denotes the maximum repression regime is capable of
- $\Omega_D(k)$ and $\Omega_A(k)$ denote $\Pr(\text{survival})$ in despotic and anocratic equilibrium

...determines “all-or-nothing” repressive strategy:

PROPOSITION (3)

If regime is capable enough, $k_H > k^$ and $\Omega_D(k_H) > \Omega_A(k_L)$, then the ruler represses maximally at k_H and the equilibrium is despotic; otherwise he represses as little as possible at k_L and the equilibrium is anocratic.*

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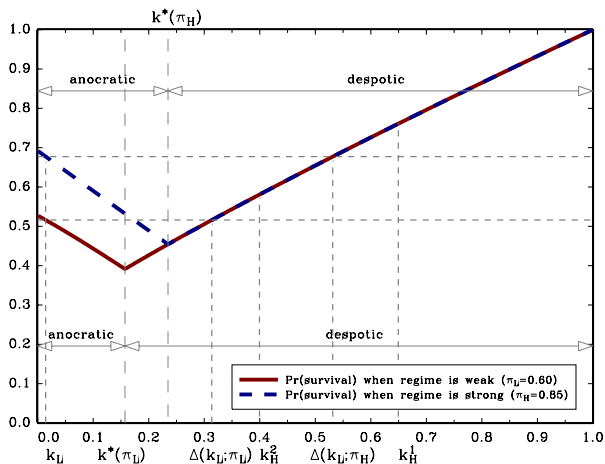
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EQUILIBRIUM WITH PRIVATE PREFERENCES

BANG-BANG RESULT



The Sudden Collapse of Repression

CONCLUSIONS

- **“now out of never” *can* happen not because of cascades but because of deliberate choice by ruler**
- authoritarian rulers have trouble motivating supporters because of status quo bias
- structural weakness *can* cause regime to risk unrest by abandoning preventive repression
- stronger regimes can be simultaneously more stable and repressive (when despotic) and more prone to sudden collapse of repression (when anocratic)
- however, even when they choose not to repress, these rulers are more likely to survive the ensuing conflict
- hoping for cascades to topple authoritarian regime is probably too optimistic; must focus on repression — incentives and constraints

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