Questions for Dictators: Question Times and Protests under Competitive Authoritarianism

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Abstract

Question times under competitive authoritarianism offer opposition deputies a public arena for criticism. I argue that autocrats grant opposition elites regular opportunities to evaluate government performance as a credible commitment to discourage protests. In a model of Bayesian persuasion, I show that arbitrary threats of violence intimidate opposition legislators into softening their criticism. It creates a biased public signal which dissuades citizens from protesting in situations where their protests would have succeeded, had no question times occurred. This analysis clarifies the role of opposition deputies under competitive authoritarianism. Unlike previous research suggests, opposition elites should have no interest in informing service provision, although autocrats would prefer informational over biased question times. But autocrats can capitalize on incentives for opposition elites to manipulate beliefs about regime support. Moreover, covert repression is essential for information manipulation, a common survival strategy in modern autocracies, although previous research interprets these concepts as mutual replacements.

1 Introduction

Several autocracies grant legislators regular opportunities to ask members of the executive questions during query sessions. Many as diverse as Vietnam, Morocco, or Zimbabwe even televise these question times live. Public question times are puzzling under competitive authoritarianism,[1] in which competition for power between regime adherents and the opposition is 'real but unfair' (Levitsky and Way 2010, p. 3), because legislatures in these regimes prominently seat deputies from opposition parties.[2] As in democracies (Salmond 2014), competitive authoritarian governments relinquish formal control of the parliamentary agenda to legislators during query sessions. At these occasions, opposition legislators are free to criticize the authoritarian government. Why do autocrats grant opposition elites regular opportunities to criticize government performance in public?

I argue that question times under competitive authoritarianism constitute a persuasion mechanism. Autocrats facing a credible threat of popular protests allow opposition elites to evaluate government performance during query sessions. Their statements produce public signals which citizens use to update their beliefs about the prospects of successful protests.

Protests succeed only if enough people are discontented and prepared to rise against the authoritarian regime.[3] Citizens face uncertainty whether enough people in other parts of their country share their dissatisfaction. Autocrats can leverage this coordination dilemma to discourage protests by having representatives of various constituencies publicly evaluate government performance. However, such a signal lacks credibility if only loyalist regime adherents engage. It requires opposition elites doing so. Even when opposition elites accommodate autocrats, their signals remain incredible if they constantly approve. For autocrats to dissuade citizens from protesting, opposition legislators must therefore occasionally criticize the government during question times.

[1] Focusing on Vietnam's single-party dictatorship, Schuler (2020, p. 1495) argues that 'public debate ... is used to mobilize public opinion to put pressure on wayward bureaucrats and to deflect blame from the autocrat.'

[2] Svolik (2012, p. 36) informs that the largest party occupied less than 75 percent of all seats in 41 percent of all autocracies in 2008. 16 percent were single-party regimes.

[3] See Edmond (2013), Little, Tucker, and LaGatta (2015), or Tucker (2007) for discussions of coordination dilemmas in collective actions against autocrats.

Whenever autocrats relinquish their formal control over the parliamentary agenda, however, opposition elites have incentives to capitalize on these opportunities. They can exploit this public arena to raise their profiles and present themselves as the vanguard of regime change. Tough stances on government performance can mobilize citizens against the regime and vault opposition elites into the highest democratic offices. These prospects induce opposition elites to accept an autocrat's poisoned chalice.

Autocrats themselves can capitalize on these incentives for opposition elites. Permitting them to criticize the government renders credible an autocrat's commitment to externalize evaluation of government performance. At the same time, they ensure that opposition deputies disapprove only just as much as needed. For this purpose, autocrats sustain a constant threat of arbitrary repression. Threats to violate their personal integrity intimidate opposition deputies into concealing genuine disapproval.[4] Their arbitrary occurrence effectively confuses citizens about regime support among society. It discourages citizens from protesting in situations where their protests would have been succeeded, had no question times occurred.

Prominent frameworks of legislative politics in autocracies emphasize cooptation (Gandhi 2008; Malesky and Schuler 2010).[5] Election into parliament benefits deputies in form of material perks and privileges (Blaydes 2010; Lust 2009). Ambitious people thus have incentives to compete for legislative seats and generate a stake in regime survival (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, p. 137). Electoral competition also ensures that legislators distribute parts of their wealth in their networks (Blaydes 2010), which nurtures mass support and mitigates external threats. Question times are argued to offer deputies an instrument to sustain allocation of private benefits and local public goods between elections because they can use them to communicate grievances in constituencies (Truex 2016). They are also argued to use query sessions to enforce service provision through public blaming when requests remain unmet (Lust 2009; Truex 2020).

[4] Violation of personal integrity is a chief form of repression. The other chief form is civil liberties restrictions (Davenport 2007, p. 487). See Frantz and Kendall-Taylor (2014) for a discussion on the association of different forms of repression with comparative authoritarianism.

[5] See Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018, pp. 136–137) for a discussion on authoritarian legislatures as arenas for elite bargaining.

Cooptation theories fail to acknowledge the serious risk that public debate can facilitate collective action. Citizens can use information disseminated in query sessions to coordinate on civic unrest (Malesky and Schuler 2010, p. 485). Gandhi (2008, p. 78) emphasizes that legislatures are ideal means of cooptation for autocrats because they provide an environment of controlled bargaining. During question times, however, autocrats relinquish that control over opposition deputies, especially when they can raise questions without notice.

Others advance the notion that question times can regulate intraregime conflict (Boix and Svolik 2013; Lü, Liu, and Li 2020; Noble 2020; Schuler 2020). Question times can enhance transparency between rival regime factions and thus strengthen commitments to power sharing (Boix and Svolik 2013). Rival factions can use question times to hold each other accountable through public blaming and deflection of blame (Noble 2020; Schuler 2020; Truex 2020). Public debate to deflect blame seems plausible in monarchies or Communist regimes in which the true authoritarian leadership is more insulated from the bureaucracy. Under competitive authoritarianism, however, these groups of actors are usually intrinsically interwoven and question times as an accountability mechanism can backfire.

The notion that question times are used as a persuasion mechanism under competitive authoritarianism is compelling because it can account for these shortcomings. It acknowledges the risk of collective action and makes the case that autocrats can shape it through the combination of a commitment to external public evaluation and covert repression. The strategy works even if citizens are fully aware that an autocrat seeks to manipulate their beliefs as long as they face uncertainty about the extent to which an opposition deputy's public approval has been elicited through acts of intimidation. It also requires no specific constellations of elite factions within the regime. At the same time, persuasion through query sessions remains compatible with the notions of public blaming, deflection of blame, and cooptation.

I develop this argument in a formal model of Bayesian persuasion (Kamenica and Gentzkow 2011).[6] Bayesian persuasion entails that a sender makes a costless commitment to a probability

[6]In the realm of autocratic politics, models of Bayesian persuasion have been used to study electoral manipulation (Gehlbach and Simpser 2015; Rozenas 2015), elimination of electoral competitors (Ma 2020), media freedom and control (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014), and signalling of economic competence (Guriev and Treisman 2020). In addition, Alonso and Câmara (2016) examine persuasion of voters. Schnakenberg (2017) studies lobbying.

distribution over signals before a signal about the state of the world is generated mechanically. A receiver observes that signal and takes an action with payoff relevance for both actors. The most critical feature of these models is the credible commitment assumption.[7] I model the signalling mechanism explicitly to mitigate the credibility issue. Specifically, the autocrat who ideally wants to signal widespread support recruits with a chosen probability a henchperson to intimidate an opposition deputy into concealing genuine disapproval. A citizen knows the probability of arbitrary intimidation, but only observes the statement of opposition deputies before deciding whether to protest.

The model has several theoretical implications. First, autocrats can generate through query sessions biased public signals which discourage protests and thus improve their odds to survive. The bias results from arbitrary intimidation of opposition deputies.

Second, I also endogenize an opposition elite's acceptance of an autocrat's offer and examine the extent to which both opposition elites and autocrats prefer to use question times for informed service provision (Gandhi 2008; Truex 2016). I show that autocrats would prefer informed service provision over biased question times. However, opposition elites have no interest in stabilizing the regime by sharing information about grievances among their constituencies. Counterintuitively, opposition elites prefer to risk arbitrary violations of their personal integrity because biased question times promise them higher odds to capitalize on regular opportunities to criticize the regime.

Third, the analysis unveils another counterintuitive result. In comparison to levels of covert repression which citizens would tolerate to dismiss protests, autocrats must effectively *lower* their resorts to arbitrary intimidation to elicit public approval, the *better* their reputation of government performance. In other words, the repressive nature of competitive authoritarian regimes decreases in their reputation of service provision not necessarily because they substitute repression with service provision, but because they must concede this decrease in repression to opposition elites for them to accept their offer and make their survival strategy work.

These results improve our knowledge about modern autocratic politics. Survival strategies

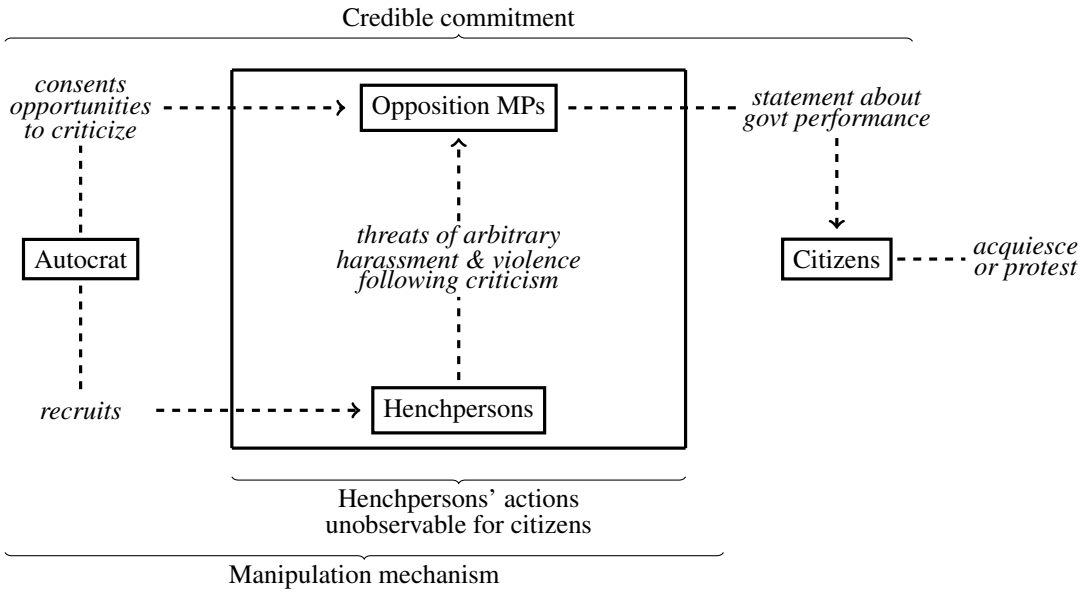
[7] See Min (2021) and Nguyen and Tan (2021) for discussions of credible commitments.

under competitive authoritarianism usually rely on manipulation of information (Gehlbach and Simpser 2015; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Guriev and Treisman 2020; Ma 2020; Rozenas 2015). Its credibility often hinges on the involvement of actors detached from or hostile to the authoritarian regime. Autocrats must thus make concessions to these actors. In the context of question times, it requires that autocrats must grant opposition elites regular opportunities to criticize the government in public. At the same time, autocrats sustain a latent threat environment (Young 2019). It ensures that opposition deputies do not capitalize on their privileges. Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik's (2016, p. 578) impression that modern autocrats rule by 'velvet fist' is therefore correct in the sense that repression is more subtle under competitive authoritarianism (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014). However, it does not mean that gentler survival strategies, such as the manipulation of information, have simply replaced repression. On the contrary, covert repression forms an integral part of such strategies.

2 Biased Question Times

Question times under competitive authoritarianism serve a persuasion mechanism. Autocrats facing a credible threat of popular protests combine consent and coercion to discourage protests. They consent opposition elites regular opportunities to publicly comment on government performance. Simultaneously, they recruit henchpersons who intimidate opposition deputies into concealing their genuine disapproval to manipulate this public signal. Coercion remains arbitrary because autocrats must ensure that opposition elites disapprove just enough to render the mechanism credible. The next two subsections illustrate this mechanism of *biased question times*, which is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Biased question times.



2.1 Consent

When facing serious threats of upheaval, autocrats must find ways to stave off collective action among disgruntled citizens. Pure reliance on repression to neutralize these threats is unfeasible when the opposition has become too powerful. It might even provoke further animosities against the authoritarian regime (Kuran 1989).

Another option is information manipulation. Revolts against authoritarian regimes usually require coordination among large crowds of people from various parts of a country and different walks of life. Protesters incur personal costs when they participate. Ideally, they would like to protest only if enough turnout of other citizens ensures protest success. Uncertainty about the readiness of others to protest constitutes a coordination dilemma. It gives autocrats an opportunity to manipulate beliefs about the scope of discontentment in society—and hence, protest success—among disgruntled citizens.

Information manipulation requires a credible public signal. Autocrats cannot simply recruit loyalist regime adherents to give public statements about government performance. Citizens would simply ignore these statements and rise up regardless. I therefore argue that autocrats

can draw on opposition elites to generate credible public signals. Opposition elites who win parliamentary seats are thus granted regular opportunities to unleash their genuine opinion about government performance during question times.

Personal incentives motivate opposition elites to accept an autocrat's poisoned chalice. Ideally, it gives them an opportunity to instigate successful protests by criticizing the authoritarian regime in a central arena of public interest. A tough stance on the regime's failures can earn opposition elites respect among the masses, raise their profile, and improve their odds to become the new democratic leader, should the autocrat fall. Autocrats can capitalize on these career concerns of opposition elites to generate credible signals about government performance.

2.2 Coercion

A credible commitment to externalize evaluation of government performance alone does not improve an autocrat's odds of survival. Without any repercussions, opposition elites simply report their genuine opinion truthfully. The coordination dilemma among disgruntled citizens would just dissolve because their interests and those of opposition deputies perfectly align. Consequently, the autocrat's odds to survive at best remain equal to those when opposition elites give no public statements.

Autocrats therefore seek to manipulate opposition behavior on the floor of parliament. Ideally, autocrats want opposition deputies to genuinely commend government performance. Hence, it is counterproductive for the regime to punish positive feedback. But autocrats want to contain disapproval. For that purpose, I argue that autocrats recruit henchpersons to sustain a constant threat of violence. Henchpersons can intimidate opposition deputies into concealing genuine disapproval.

Intimidation and assaults must remain arbitrary. Punishment must not occur each time an opposition deputy would want to criticize the authoritarian government. It would either silence opposition elites altogether or make them flatter the authoritarian government at every occasion to avoid retaliation. In either case, citizens would ignore what opposition elites say and rely

on their prior beliefs about the prospects of successful protests. The autocratic regime must thus intimidate opposition deputies arbitrarily. At the same time, autocrats seek to ensure that opposition deputies disapprove just enough to optimize their odds of survival.

Autocrats recruit henchpersons using reward schemes. Autocrats promise their henchpersons personal rewards, should protests fail to materialize after opposition deputies are lenient with the authoritarian regime. Henchpersons are often recruited from the same areas in which opposition deputies have their constituencies.

I argue that the recruitment of repressive agents is costless. Many rewards are related to new jobs or promotions. In Zimbabwe, perpetrators often receive jobs in government or parastatal companies and continue to get promoted in return for further acts of violence. Others get permission for illegal gold panning in their local area or access to market stalls, obtain access to international donor aid, or loot resources from opposition members (Kriger 2012, p. 17). Members of youth organizations might also rise up the party hierarchy in return for services (Svolik 2012, pp. 162–195). In all these examples, the authoritarian government incurs no additional costs because it either externalizes them or costs are sunk. For instance, jobs in the state bureaucracy or companies are usually permanent positions which are not created for an individual perpetrator specifically. Similarly, expected streams of benefits at senior party positions are already running when juniors rise up the ranks, unless exogenous shocks dry them up.

2.3 Citizens

Biased question times primarily target discontented citizens. Disgruntled citizens observe public statements of opposition deputies and use them to inform their protest decision. Citizens are also well informed about everything that happens outside the box in Figure 1. They know that the autocrat has opposition elites make public statements on purpose. They also know that he recruits perpetrators who constitute a constant threat environment. The only aspect which citizens cannot observe is to what extent an opposition deputy's approval of government performance is genuine or enforced through intimidation.

3 Formal Model

Consider a sequential game of incomplete information.

Players. An autocrat A (male pronoun) and his henchperson H (neutral pronoun) interact with a legislator L_O and a citizen C (both female pronouns). The citizen resides in an opposition stronghold. Legislator L_O represents another constituency under control of the opposition.

Actions. At the beginning, autocrat A sets $\rho \in [0, 1]$. Parameter ρ becomes common knowledge and captures the likelihood that henchperson H is a hardliner as further discussed below. The choice of ρ is costless. Henchperson H chooses whether to intimidate legislator L_O by sending message $m_H = \{0, 1\}$. Should it intimidate but the legislator still disapproves and citizen C's protest succeeds, henchperson H can reconsider its assault. Specifically, henchperson H can retreat or violate legislator L_O's personal integrity, $a_H = \{0, 1\}$. Legislator L_O approves or disapproves of government performance, $m_{L_O} = \{a, d\}$. Her message is publicly observable. Citizen C can protest, $a_C = \{0, 1\}$.

Information. Henchperson H features either of two types. It is a *hardliner* $\Omega = \{h\}$ with probability $P(\Omega = h) = \rho$, or a *softliner* $\Omega = \{s\}$ otherwise. Acts of intimidation are private knowledge shared between henchperson H and legislator L_O. In other words, only legislator L_O observes its potential threat but also faces uncertainty about henchperson H's type.

Legislator L_O herself also features either of two types. Her first type genuinely approves of government performance, her second type genuinely does not, $\Theta = \{A, D\}$. In the remainder, *approver* is used as a shorthand for a legislator's approving type and *disapprover* for her disapproving type. An approver occurs with probability $P(\Theta = A) = \mu \in (0, 1)$. This is common knowledge. Only the legislator and the henchperson have complete information about her type. Information environments differ between autocrat A and citizen C in the sense that the autocrat must set ρ *before* the legislator evaluates government performance. He must thus rely on his prior beliefs. The citizen observes the legislator's public statement and might thus

have an opportunity to update her beliefs.

Payoffs. Autocrat A's payoffs are normalized to 1 whenever he survives in office, and to 0 otherwise. Citizen C's payoffs are normalized to 0 unless she protests. Protests incur costs $c \in (0, 1)$ upon citizen C. Only if they succeed, democracy arises and citizen C gains benefit $y \in (c, 1]$. Importantly, protests succeed if and only if the legislator is a disapprover.

Legislator L_O's payoffs vary across her types. Besides henchperson H's actions, they are shaped by the preferences over protests among her own constituency. An approver's constituency has benefitted from service provision. In this case, her constituency has no incentive to join citizen C's protests, which are thus doomed. Democracy never arises, but the legislator gains a payoff of $x \in (0, 1)$ from prior service provision to her constituency.

No prior service provision has occurred when the legislator is a disapprover. In that case, her payoffs from service provision are normalized to 0. Her constituency prefers supporting citizen C's protests, which succeed whenever the citizen instigates them. A disapprover's payoffs from democracy hinge on her actions in parliament. If she publicly disapproves and thus mobilizes citizen C, the legislator becomes the new democratic leader, which yields a benefit of 1. Should a disapprover conceal her genuine disapproval but citizen C nevertheless protests, protests succeed but legislator L_O only enjoys democracy and thus a payoff of y.

The henchperson's action might incur costs upon legislator L_O. Whatever regime outcome arises, legislator L_O bears costs $k > 1$ whenever the henchperson violates his personal integrity. Henchperson H does so whenever the legislator criticizes government performance despite its threats to harm her for public criticism, and yet the autocrat survives. If henchperson H did threaten to attack legislator L_O, she publicly disapproves regardless and the autocrat falls, the henchperson can still suit his action to his word and assault legislator L_O after the advent of democracy. Consequently, legislator L_O bears cost k in this case too.

To avert civic protests, however, the autocrat wants the legislator to commend government performance. It is counterproductive to assault the legislator for making positive statements about the autocrat. Assumption 1 is thus imposed upon the henchperson's actions.

Assumption 1. *Henchperson H may violate legislator L_O's personal integrity if and only if*

she conveys disapproval.

Henchperson H's payoffs also vary across its types. A hardliner dislikes democracy. Its benefits from democracy are thus normalized to 0. It does like the autocratic regime instead and enjoys a benefit normalized to 1 whenever the autocrat remains in power. In contrast, a softliner enjoys a benefit of y from democracy, but only if it has not intimidated the legislator beforehand. In the latter case, a softliner's benefit from democracy is normalized to 0.[8] A softliner's benefit from autocrat A's rule is also normalized to 0. Moreover, henchperson H irrespective of its type benefits from service provision and gains x when the legislator is an approver.[9]

Whenever the autocrat survives in office after the legislator has publicly approved his government, henchperson H gets reward $r > c$. This history is effectively the only scenario in which the henchperson might have successfully intimidated the legislator into concealing her genuine preferences such that it secures the autocrat's survival. In all other histories, the autocrat either must infer that a henchperson's attempts to intimidate the legislator have not been effective, or he has been ousted and cannot reward the henchperson for its commitments.

Nevertheless, a hardliner is assumed to enjoy an assault on legislator L_O even after the ascent of democracy. For instance, a hardliner might experience psychological satisfaction from attacking her or resorts to guerilla warfare and considers its assault as a successful step towards the revival of the *ancien régime*. To economize on parameters, a hardliner enjoys reward r following this scenario too.

Unless they occur under democracy, neither acts of intimidation nor attacks on opposition elites are costly. If democracy has arisen, henchperson H bears cost c when violating the legislator's personal integrity.

Timing.

1. Autocrat A sets ρ, which becomes common knowledge.

[8] In a stylized way, this payoff structure captures the idea that perpetrators might face adverse consequences for their actions under autocracy in processes of transitional justice (Bates, Cinar, and Nalepa 2020).

[9] Although irrelevant for equilibrium plays, it captures the fact that an autocrat's henchpersons often live in the same area like their victims. For an illustrative example from Zimbabwe, see Kriger's (2012, p. 18) account on the constituency of Maramba Pfungwe, Mashonaland East.

2. Nature draws legislator L_O's type, $\Theta \in \{A, D\}$. Legislator L_O privately observes Θ.

3. Nature draws henchperson H's type, $\Omega \in \{h, s\}$. Henchperson H privately observes Ω and can send legislator L_O a private intimidating message, $m_H = \{0, 1\}$.

4. Legislator L_O observes private message m_H and conveys public message $m_{L_O} = \{a, d\}$.

5. Citizen C only observes message m_{L_O} and can protest, $a_C = \{0, 1\}$.

6. If henchperson H intimidates but legislator L_O conveys $m_{L_O} = \{d\}$ regardless and citizen C protests successfully, henchperson H can assault legislator L_O, $a_H = \{0, 1\}$.

Solution concept. The solution concept is an autocrat-preferred perfect Bayesian equilibrium.[10] Given autocrat A's choice of ρ, legislator L_O conveys a public signal following her interaction with henchperson H. Citizen C observes this signal, informs her posterior beliefs about the legislator's type using Bayes' rule, and takes an action that maximizes her own expected utility. Whenever indifferent between actions, any player takes that action which maximizes the autocrat's expected utility. Moreover, an equilibrium must conform with sequential rationality and weakly consistent beliefs.

Bayesian persuasion through question times is relevant only if it can change the citizen's equilibrium behavior. Hence, impose Assumption 2. It ensures that the citizen protests in the absence of question times, or when the legislator pools her signals for that matter.

Assumption 2. $\mu < \frac{(y-c)}{y} \equiv \overline{\mu}$.

All proofs are found in the online appendix.

[10]The solution concept in the conventional framework is a *sender-preferred subgame perfect equilibrium* (Kamenica and Gentzkow 2011, p. 2594). The attribute of a sender's preference is ambiguous in this context because the autocrat manipulates interaction between two additional players to create a signal which a citizen observes. However, the legislator as one of those two players does in fact convey the public signal. The autocrat's and legislator's interests are at best partly aligned. Moreover, the research interest is whether the autocrat can shape the citizen's incentives by manipulating the legislator's public behavior in equilibrium. The notion of an autocrat-preferred subgame perfect equilibrium would already suffice in the baseline model.

3.1 Comments on the Setup

The model is a stylized simplification of question times under competitive authoritarianism. Its primary purpose is to isolate an autocrat's potential to manipulate beliefs among citizens. Thus, protests succeed when the legislator is a disapprover and the citizen protests. In the real world, regime overthrow is more complex. In particular, successful protests require collective action. The citizen's collective action problem is reflected in her uncertainty about the legislator's type. The citizen takes cues from the legislator's statements in parliament to inform her protest decision.

Benefits from democracy are interpreted as a public good. Each citizen enjoys a public good of y under democracy. A democratic leader gains an additional private benefit of $(1-y)$ from ruling a democracy. Parameter y therefore reflects the *expected quality of democracy*: if y approaches c, the successor regime rather resembles an oligarchy; the more y approaches 1, the more democratic it becomes.

Another important parameter is μ. It expresses the probability that the legislator is an approver. Her genuine approval results from prior service provision to her constituency. Parameter μ thus captures the autocrat's overall *reputation of service provision* among citizens.

Parameter x is also related to service provision. Unlike μ, however, parameter x captures the *quality of delivered services*.

3.2 Obedience Constraints

Solving this game involves the construction of an equilibrium in which the citizen obeys the legislator's message. The citizen acquiesces whenever the legislator conveys approval, and protests otherwise. To establish these obedience constraints, notice that signalling approval is an approver's equilibrium strategy. I first invoke this as an assumption and prove that this is correct in Proposition 1 below.

Assumption 3. *When she is an approver, $\Theta = \{A\}$, legislator L_O signals approval.*

Assumption 3 has straightforward consequences for the citizen's obedience constraints. She infers with certainty that the legislator must be a disapprover whenever observing disapproval, $P(\Theta = D|m_{L_O} = d) = 1$. Consequently, she protests because it yields a strictly higher expected utility than acquiescence,

$$\underbrace{y - c}_{\text{Protest}} > \underbrace{0}_{\text{Acquiescence}}.$$

If the citizen observes approval, however, she obeys the signal and acquiesces if and only if

$$\underbrace{P(\Theta = A|m_{L_O} = a)[-c] + P(\Theta = D|m_{L_O} = a)[y - c]}_{\text{Protest}} \leq \underbrace{0}_{\text{Acquiescence}}.$$

For this constraint to hold, her posterior belief that the legislator is an approver when observing approval must conform with

$$P(\Theta = A|m = a) \geq \frac{(y - c)}{y}. \tag{1}$$

3.3 Baseline Model

Before discussing the full model, I examine a baseline model: the henchperson has no agency and acts mechanically. Specifically, suppose a hardliner always intimidates and ultimately assaults—even if democracy has already arisen—whereas a softliner never takes any of these actions.[11] This simplification implies that the legislator effectively faces personal harm with probability ρ, should she publicly criticize the government.

[11] The henchperson's actions are thus equivalent to a separating strategy according to which a hardliner intimidates and a softliner does not in the full model. Thus, the legislator's posterior beliefs about the henchperson's type are $P(h|1) = 1$ and $P(s|0) = 1$, respectively.

Suppose the citizen's obedience constraints hold and legislator L_O receives a personal threat. Assumption 3 ensures that an approver reports truthfully. However, a disapprover strictly prefers to conceal her genuine discontentment,

$$\underbrace{1-k}_{\text{Disapproval}} < \underbrace{0}_{\text{Approval}}.$$

Public disapproval would successfully mobilize citizen C and make legislator L_O the new democratic leader. But the legislator's personal repercussions would be severe. The rise of democracy thus yields worse payoffs for the legislator than the autocrat's survival in power.

Suppose instead the legislator receives no personal threat. In this case, a disapprover faces no harmful repercussions and strictly prefers to criticize the government. Her disapproval sparks successful protests and she becomes the new democratic ruler,

$$\underbrace{1}_{\text{Disapproval}} > \underbrace{0}_{\text{Approval}}.$$

Legislator L_O must not constantly approve. Such a pooling strategy would induce citizen C to simply ignore her signals. In other words, a disapprover must criticize with a probability consistent with the obedience constraint in Equation 1 to discourage citizen C from protesting. The citizen cannot distinguish genuine from enforced approval if a disapprover approves with a positive probability. Hence, the citizen uses Bayes' rule to inform her protest decision. Suppose an approver approves with probability $\tau_A \in [0,1]$, whereas a disapprover approves with probability $\tau_D \in [0,1]$. Thus, Bayes' rule implies that observed approval is genuine with probability

$$P(\Theta = A | m_{L_O} = a) = \frac{\tau_A \mu}{\tau_A \mu + \tau_D (1-\mu)},$$

Assumption 3 ensures that $\tau_A = 1$. To elicit constraints on the probability that a disapprover approves, substitute $P(\Theta = A|m_{L_O} = a)$ into Inequality 1 and solve for τ_D,

$$\tau_D \leq \frac{\mu}{(1-\mu)} \frac{c}{(y-c)} \equiv \overline{\tau}_D. \tag{2}$$

The likelihood that a disapprover approves must not exceed $\tau_D \leq \overline{\tau}_D$ for the autocrat to dissuade the citizen from protesting.

When henchperson H acts mechanically, it is straightforward to determine the probability that legislator L_O conceals her genuine disapproval. A disapprover conceals whenever she observes a personal threat. Personal threats occur with probability ρ. Consequently, $\tau_D = \rho$.

Finally, determine autocrat A's optimal choice of ρ. Substitute $\tau_D = \rho$ into Constraint 2. Thus, the autocrat's optimization problem is

$$\begin{aligned} &\underset{\rho \in [0,1]}{\operatorname{argmax}}\, \mu + [1-\mu]\rho \text{ s. t.} \\ &\rho \leq \overline{\tau}_D \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

because he survives in power with certainty if legislator L_O is an approver, and with probability ρ otherwise given citizen C's obedience constraints hold. It immediately follows that the autocrat's expected payoffs strictly increase in the probability that henchperson H is a hardliner and intimidates, ρ, if and only if $\rho \leq \overline{\tau}_D$. Otherwise, citizen C just ignores legislator L_O's public statement and protests regardless. In the latter case, the autocrat could only expect a payoff of μ. Autocrat A therefore sets

$$\rho_B^* = \overline{\tau}_D \tag{4}$$

to optimize his expected utility.[12] It establishes an autocrat-preferred perfect Bayesian equilibrium.

Proposition 1. *An autocrat-preferred perfect Bayesian equilibrium in the baseline model exists*

[12] Subscript B highlights that ρ_B^* in Equation 4 is autocrat A's optimal choice in the baseline model.

if and only if autocrat A sets ρ_B^*. Legislator L_O forms posterior beliefs $P(h|1) = 1$ and $P(s|0) = 1$. An approver always approves. A disapprover approves with probability $\tau_D^* = \rho^*$. Citizen C forms posterior beliefs $P(\Theta = A|m_{L_O} = a) = (y-c)/y$, $P(\Theta = D|m_{L_O} = d) = 1$, $P(\Omega = h|m_{L_O} = d, \Theta) = 0$, and $P(\Omega = h|m_{L_O} = a, \Theta) = \rho/(\rho + (1-\rho)\mu)$. Thus, citizen C protests whenever legislator L_O criticizes, and acquiesces otherwise.

3.4 Full Model

Henchperson H is a strategic actor in the full model. After observing its type, it decides whether to intimidate legislator L_O. If it does but the latter still mobilizes successful protests through criticism, the henchperson reconsiders its threat and either suits its actions to its words or retreats.

Henchperson H's agency does not change equilibrium outcomes. To see this, suppose henchperson H has sought to intimidate legislator L_O but she criticized regardless. Given her obedience constraints, citizen C consequently protested with success. A hardliner has no incentives to retreat from its threats and therefore violates the legislator's personal integrity despite the costs of such an assault,

$$\underbrace{r-c}_{\text{Assault}} > \underbrace{0}_{\text{Retreat}}.$$

In contrast, a softliner would strictly prefer to retreat from its threat for it only incurs costs when assaulting the legislator,

$$\underbrace{-c}_{\text{Assault}} < \underbrace{0}_{\text{Retreat}}.$$

Move backward in the history of play and consider the henchperson's decision to intimidate. Intimidation is a weakly dominant strategy for hardliners facing a disapprover. It enables them to suit their actions to their words regardless of regime type. Should the legislator be an

approver, a hardliner remains indifferent between intimidation and no intimidation.

Consider a softliner. A softliner is also indifferent between intimidation and no intimidation if the legislator is an approver. If she is a disapprover, a softliner's strategy not to intimidate is weakly dominant because it can achieve a benefit from democracy only if it refrains from any acts of intimidation before protests succeed. If democracy does not arise whatever action the legislator takes, a softliner expects the same payoffs from either strategy.

The full model thus effectively reduces to the baseline model.[13] A hardliner always intimidates; a softliner never does. Hence, the henchperson separates strategies in equilibrium and legislator L_O can infer its type with certainty, $P(h|1) = 1$ and $P(s|0) = 0$. Consequently, an approver always reports truthfully given Assumption 3. A disapprover conceals her genuine disapproval with probability $\tau_D = \rho$. Finally, the autocrat optimizes his payoffs and survival rates with $\rho^* = \overline{\tau}_D$.

Proposition 2. *An autocrat-preferred perfect Bayesian equilibrium exists when the henchperson constitutes an active player and separates strategies such that a hardliner always and a softliner never intimidates legislator L_O. If a disapprover criticizes off the equilibrium path, a hardliner assaults her afterwards whereas a softliner retreats. Otherwise, all other actors follow the same equilibrium strategies as in Proposition 1.*

3.5 Self-Enforcing Question Times

Question times constitute an institution which must be self-enforcing (Fearon 2011; Przeworski 2008). Opposition elites must accept their participation in question times, especially when they are skewed in an autocrat's favor. This agreement has been taken as exogenously given thus far. In this section, I endogenize an opposition elite's choice to participate in biased question times.

Timing. At the beginning, autocrat A chooses ρ, which becomes public knowledge as before. Legislator L_O observes the autocrat's choice and can reject or accept his offer to make

[13] Multiple equilibria exist due to the indifference of both types of the henchperson when facing an approver, but equilibrium outcomes remain the same substantively.

public evaluations of government policy, $a_{L_O} = \{r, a\}$. If she accepts, the game proceeds as in the main model. If the legislator rejects, Nature draws her type $\Theta = \{A, D\}$. Citizen C moves next, does not observe the legislator's type, but can protest, $a_C = \{0, 1\}$.

Payoffs. When the legislator rejects, consider these payoffs: henchperson H gets a payoff of 0 regardless. Autocrat A's payoffs remain normalized to 1 whenever he survives in office, and to 0 otherwise. Citizen C continues to bear costs c from protesting and gains a benefit of y only if protests succeed. Should she not protest, her payoffs are normalized to 0. Finally, legislator L_O receives a benefit of x when she is an approver. As before, protests fail in that case. Should citizen C not protest, a disapprover gets a payoff of 0. Otherwise, protests succeed and a disapprover benefits from democracy with y as any other citizen unaffiliated with the autocratic regime.

Opposition elites might have incentives to accept the autocrat's offer. It grants them an opportunity to raise their own profiles and improves their odds to become the new democratic leaders. Though, this is possible only if they take a tough public stance on the autocrat's failures to earn respect among the masses. However, opposition elites do not accept this poisoned chalice unconditionally. This expansion shows that the autocrat must further confine acts of intimidation to make opposition elites accept.

Consider the legislator's expected payoffs from rejection. Given Assumption 2, the citizen protests in the absence of question times. Legislator L_O thus expects

$$\underbrace{\mu[x]}_{\text{Approver}} + \underbrace{[1-\mu][y]}_{\text{Disapprover}} \tag{5}$$

because she is either an approver and benefits from service delivery while protests fail or a disapprover and enjoys democracy after protests succeed.

Proposition 2 describes the history of play after legislator L_O accepts. The henchperson is a hardliner with probability ρ and a softliner otherwise. Hardliners always make credible threats to assault opposition elites, softliners never do. Given her obedience constraints hold, citizen C protests if the legislator disapproves and acquiesces otherwise. An opposition elite

always reports genuine approval, but conceals genuine disapproval when facing a hardliner. From accepting the autocrat's offer, legislator L_O can thus expect

$$\underbrace{\mu[x]}_{\text{Approver}} + \underbrace{[1-\mu][1-\rho]}_{\text{Disapprover}}.$$

Her exit option restricts the conditions for an opposition elite's acceptance. She does accept if and only if

$$\rho \leq (1-y) \equiv \overline{\rho} \Leftrightarrow \underbrace{\mu[x] + [1-\mu][1-\rho]}_{\text{Acceptance}} \geq \underbrace{\mu[x] + [1-\mu][y]}_{\text{Rejection}}. \tag{6}$$

The autocrat thus faces two constraints which limit his potential to elicit positive statements from disapprovers—*citizen constraint* $\rho \leq \overline{\tau}_D$ and *legislator constraint* $\rho \leq \overline{\rho}$. Lemma 1 establishes that which constraint is more binding hinges on an autocrat's prior reputation of service provision μ. To simplify notation, define

$$\underline{\mu} \equiv \frac{y[(1-y)+c]-c}{y[(1-y)+c]}.$$

Lemma 1. *The legislator constraint is more binding than the citizen constraint if and only if* $\underline{\mu} < \mu < \overline{\mu}$*, and vice versa if* $\mu \leq \underline{\mu}$*.*

It affects the autocrat's optimal choice of ρ. When question times must be self-enforcing, his optimization problem is defined as

$$\begin{aligned} &\underset{\rho \in [0,1]}{\operatorname{argmax}}\, \mu + [1-\mu]\rho \text{ s. t.} \\ &\qquad \rho \leq \min[\overline{\tau}_D, \overline{\rho}]. \end{aligned} \tag{7}$$

The autocrat can improve his payoffs and odds to survive only if both constraints hold. As before, his payoffs increase in ρ unless any of the constraints fails. Lemma 1 thus suggests that

autocrat A sets

$$\rho^* = \begin{cases} \overline{\tau}_D & \text{if } \mu \leq \underline{\mu}, \\ \overline{\rho} & \text{if } \underline{\mu} < \mu < \overline{\mu} \end{cases} \tag{8}$$

to optimize his expected utility. In either case, legislator L_O accepts autocrat A's offer and participates in biased question times.

Proposition 3. *An autocrat-preferred perfect Bayesian equilibrium with self-enforcing question times exists if autocrat A sets ρ^* depending on his prior reputation of service delivery μ. A hardliner always, a softliner never intimidates legislator L_O. Legislator L_O forms posterior beliefs $P(h|1) = 1$ and $P(s|0) = 1$. An approver always approves. A disapprover approves with probability $\tau_D^* = \rho^*$. Citizen C a posteriori believes that $P(\Theta = A|m = a) = \mu/(\mu+\rho^*(1-\mu))$ and thus protests whenever legislator L_O disapproves, and acquiesces otherwise. Off the path, a hardliner assaults legislator L_O and a softliner retreats from its threat.*

4 Service Provision

Previous scholarship argues that 'most authoritarian legislatures play a role in the allocation of private benefits and local public goods' (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, p. 137). Truex (2016) emphasizes that legislators remonstrate within bounds on behalf of their constituencies. Autocrats who grant deputies regular opportunities to criticize the government might thus simply use that information for delivering requested services, not as a mechanism to discourage protests.

I extend the full model with self-enforcing question times and add the option that autocrat A can instead offer unbiased question times to acquire information on grievances among constituencies—*informational question times*. For illustrative purposes, I exclusively focus on this added subgame before I discuss the complete model below.

This extension establishes two remarkable results: first, autocrats would prefer informational over biased question times. Second, however, opposition elites have no incentives to

participate in informational question times. Their personal gains from informational question times would be exiguous. If the autocrat can acquire information about grievances, he can use it to stabilize his regime. The flip side is that opposition elites themselves can rarely capitalize on grievances and mobilize citizens to oust the autocrat. Hence, they prefer political turmoil over local development.

Timing. Consider the subgame of informational question times. At the beginning, legislator L_O can reject or accept informational question times, $a_{L_O} = \{r, a\}$. If the legislator rejects, the game unfolds without question times as before. If the legislator accepts, the timing is as follows:

1. Nature draws legislator L_O's type, $\Theta = \{A, D\}$.
2. Legislator L_O privately observes Θ and publicly conveys approval or disapproval, $m_{L_O} = \{a, d\}$.
3. Autocrat A only observes m_{L_O} and can deliver a service, $a_A = \{\neg s, s\}$.
4. Citizen C observes m_{L_O}, but not a_A, and can protest, $a_C = \{0, 1\}$.

Payoffs. In the subgame of informational question times, henchperson H remains inactive throughout. Its payoffs are normalized to 0. Citizen C bears costs c from protesting, which yields a benefit of y only if protests succeed. Should she acquiesce, citizen C's payoffs are normalized to 0. Autocrat A's payoffs from survival in office and overthrow remain normalized to 1 and 0, respectively. Moreover, he bears cost x if he delivers a service. Suppose the autocrat provides no service blindly: if the legislator is an approver, the autocrat provides no additional service even if he technically chooses doing so.[14] Legislator L_O keeps her previous service and autocrat A spares costs of additional service provision. An approver therefore gains a payoff of x irrespective of the autocrat's or citizen's action. If the citizen does not protest, a disapprover's payoffs remain normalized to 0 unless the autocrat delivers a service. In the

[14] In other words, uncertainty around service delivery lifts before payoffs are distributed and the game ends. This assumption seems plausible for governments might not know whether authorized services remain undelivered during the implementation process. Once they are informed about poor provision, governments can trace back the implementation process to confirm the veracity of such claims, and act accordingly.

latter case, a disapprover also gains a payoff of x. If citizen C does protest but the autocrat fails to deliver a service, a disapprover's payoffs hinge on her public message. If she mobilizes successful protests through public criticism, she becomes the new democratic leader and gains a payoff of 1. Should she conceal her genuine disapproval, the autocrat still gets ousted but a disapprover only enjoys a benefit of y from democracy.

Suppose legislator L_O accepts, separates her strategies, and reports truthfully. Both autocrat A and citizen C can perfectly discriminate between the legislator's types, $P(D|d) = 1$ and $P(A|a) = 1$. If the legislator is an approver, any protest would fail and citizen C thus acquiesces. The autocrat remains indifferent between service provision and no service provision. If the legislator disapproves, citizen C and autocrat A have opposing interests and therefore randomize their strategies. Autocrat A delivers a service with probability $\alpha \in [0, 1]$. Citizen C protests with probability $\gamma \in [0, 1]$.

Suppose the legislator is a disapprover. Autocrat A and citizen C seek to make each other indifferent. Autocrat A thus delivers a service with probability

$$\alpha^* = \frac{y - c}{y} \Leftrightarrow \underbrace{\overbrace{\alpha[-c]}^{\text{Service}} + \overbrace{[1 - \alpha][y - c]}^{\text{No service}}}_{\text{Protest}} = \underbrace{0}_{\text{Acquiescence}} . \tag{9}$$

In return, citizen C protests with probability

$$\gamma^* = x \Leftrightarrow \underbrace{\overbrace{\gamma[0]}^{\text{Protest}} + \overbrace{[1 - \gamma][1]}^{\text{No protest}}}_{\text{No service}} = \underbrace{1 - x}_{\text{Service}} . \tag{10}$$

These strategies constitute an autocrat-preferred subgame perfect Bayesian equilibrium because neither type of the legislator has incentives to deviate. Due to autocrat A's indifference when the legislator is an approver, multiple equilibria in which the legislator reports truthfully exist. Without lack of generality, Lemma 2 summarizes the more intuitive equilibrium.

Lemma 2. *An autocrat-preferred subgame perfect Bayesian equilibrium exists if legislator L_O reports truthfully. Autocrat A and citizen C form posterior beliefs that $P(D|d) = 1$ and $P(A|a) = 1$. If the legislator approves, autocrat A delivers no service and citizen C acquiesces.*

If the legislator disapproves, autocrat A delivers a service with probability α^* and citizen C protests with probability γ^*.

However, legislator L_O has no incentives to accept informational question times. To see this, recall that her expected utility from rejecting the autocrat's offer is given in Equation 5. From informational question times, legislator L_O can expect x. It immediately follows that legislator L_O prefers political turmoil over service provision as a consequence of informational question times.

Proposition 4. *Legislator L_O rejects informational question times.*

5 Biased versus Informational Question Times

Autocrat A can choose from three different options. First, he can make no offer, $a_A = \{nQS\}$. In this case, no question time takes place, Nature draws legislator L_O's type, and citizen C can protest but faces uncertainty about the legislator's type. Second, he can offer informed service provision, $a_A = \{iQS\}$. The game then proceeds as in the subgame of informational question times. Third, he can offer opposition elites regular opportunities to evaluate government performance in the shadow of arbitrary harassment, $a_A = \{bQS\}$. In that case, the game proceeds as in the full model with self-enforcing biased question times. Recall that, with the exception of no query session, legislator L_O can reject any of autocrat A's offers.

The equilibrium of this game is counterintuitive. The autocrat would prefer informational over biased question times but infers that opposition elites have no incentives to cooperate in service provision (Proposition 4). Biased question times are thus an autocrat's second-best option. Counterintuitively, opposition elites accept biased query sessions given Constraint 6 holds. In other words, opposition elites prefer regular opportunities to criticize the autocratic government, even though these come with arbitrary harassment, over informed service provision, which involves no violation of their personal integrity.

Proposition 5. *Autocrats offer biased question times to improve their political survival. Given*

Constraint 6 holds, opposition elites accept this offer, whereas they would reject informational question times.

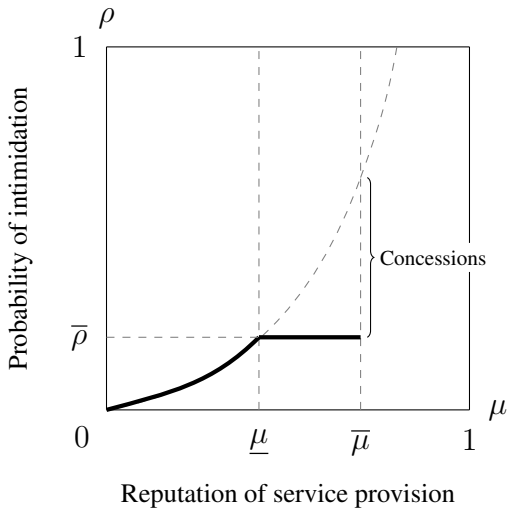
Remarkably, risk of personal harm is in the interest of opposition elites. To reiterate, a tough stance on government performance can earn opposition elites respect among the masses. Biased question times thus give them opportunities to raise their own profiles and improve their odds to become the new democratic leader, should the autocrat fall.

To make sure, their main goal of regime change is also achievable for opposition elites through informational question times. Truthful reporting for informed service provision can also raise their profile. However, the likelihood that opposition elites can capitalize on the public nature of query sessions is higher when they are biased and not used to inform service provision. However, informational question times enable opposition elites to achieve regime change only if the autocrat shirks to spare the costs despite an opposition deputy's public criticism, and disgruntled citizens seek their fortune and mobilize. In biased question times, opposition deputies have more control over regime outcomes and thus prefer them over informed service provision, even if they might have to take into account violations of their personal integrity.

6 Biased Question Times with Imperfect Communication

The analysis establishes that autocrats can shape citizen beliefs through biased question times. For this purpose, autocrats recruit henchpersons to intimidate opposition deputies. As Proposition 3 implies, however, actual assaults on opposition deputies should not occur in equilibrium. Yet, they do in the real world. In the online appendix, I provide a model of Bayesian persuasion with imperfect communication. In this extension, assaults do occur in equilibrium because opposition deputies fail to observe acts of intimidation.

Figure 2: Covert repression.



7 Discussion

Figure 2 summarizes the main result. Autocrats face two constraints when they seek to discourage protests through biased question times. If an autocrat's reputation of service provision is below $\underline{\mu}$, the *citizen constraint* is more binding and autocrats restrict the probability that their henchpersons intimidate opposition deputies accordingly. At an intermediate reputation of service provision ($\underline{\mu} < \mu < \overline{\mu}$), the *legislator constraint* is more binding. Autocrats must therefore fix the probability of intimidation at a steady level throughout this parameter space, although citizens would obey biased signals at even higher levels of harassment against opposition deputies. In other words, the higher an autocrat's reputation of service provision, the more opportunities to communicate without fear of repercussions the autocrat must concede to opposition elites. Otherwise, they do not accept his poisoned chalice and he cannot improve his political survival.

Comparative statics also have clear indications on the relationship between repression and the expected quality of democracy. When societies expect democracy to improve living conditions through provision of public goods of high quality, autocrats must further restrict repression. Such expectations constrain autocrats directly because they raise the threshold up to which citizens are willing to defy the autocrat whenever local services have not been delivered

as expected, $\partial\overline{\mu}/\partial y > 0$. They also constrain autocrats indirectly: opposition elites, who aim at representing the vanguard of democratic change, become less inclined to accept an autocrat's offer when expectations on democracy increase, $\partial\overline{\tau}_D/\partial y < 0$ and $\partial\overline{\rho}/\partial y < 0$. In other words, an autocrat's potential to elicit positive statements from opposition elites through intimidation to bolster their own survival decreases in the expected quality of democracy among society.

Biased question times are Pareto-improving. The private welfare of all actors involved either remains the same or increases. The autocrat's expected utility clearly increases from μ to $\mu + (1-\mu)\rho^*$. A hardliner's welfare improves from $\mu(1+x)$ to $\mu(1+x+r)+(1-\mu)(1+r)$, whereas a softliner's increases from μx to $\mu(x+r)+(1-\mu)(r)$. An opposition deputy expects a utility of $\mu x + (1-\mu)y$ when question times are absent, and $\mu x + (1-\mu)(1-\rho^*)$ otherwise. Hence, her expected payoffs increase if and only if $\mu \leq \underline{\mu}$ and remain the same otherwise. Similarly, a citizen expects a utility of $\mu(-c) + (1-\mu)(y-c)$ without but $(1-\mu)(1-\rho^*)(y-c)$ with question times. Consequently, citizens expect their payoffs to remain the same if and only if $\mu \leq \underline{\mu}$, and to increase in the autocrat's reputation of service provision if $\underline{\mu} < \mu < \overline{\mu}$. Thus, Pareto efficiency constitutes another advantage of biased question times over competing mechanisms.

In the previous literature, a common explanation for question times under competitive authoritarianism is that they give opposition elites opportunities to remonstrate on behalf of their constituents and thus enable autocrats to inform service provision (Lust 2009; Truex 2016). This analysis shows that autocrats would even prefer informed service provision over biased question times. However, opposition elites themselves have no interest in informed service provision. Their personal gains are too small because informational question times offer them little scope to capitalize on tough criticism about government performance. For these reasons, opposition elites are more inclined to accept biased question times, even though they come with arbitrary intimidation.

8 Conclusion

Competitive authoritarian regimes often grant opposition deputies regular opportunities to criticize the government during question times. I argue that this is part of a manipulation mechanism. Arbitrary intimidation induces opposition deputies to soften their criticism of the authoritarian government. Autocrats leverage these threats to create a biased public signal which confuses citizens about the approval of government performance among society. This strategy can effectively discourage protests in situations where protests would have succeeded, had citizens not observed public statements by opposition deputies on government performance.

Future research should take more seriously the heterogeneity of political affiliation among legislators. The vast majority of seats in authoritarian legislatures are still occupied by partisan deputies (Svolik 2012, p. 36). Do roles of legislators under competitive authoritarianism differ along political divides? Deputies have prominently been attested the role of service providers in autocratic contexts (Lust 2009; Truex 2016). My argument defies this notion, but focuses on opposition deputies. The role to act as representatives who remonstrate on behalf of their constituencies might be limited to partisan deputies because the support of partisan strongholds is more critical to regime survival. It is thus imperative to examine the roles of legislators across political affiliations.

The notion of biased question times is a corrective to previous accounts on survival strategies of modern autocrats. They are often argued to govern with a 'velvet fist' (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2016, p. 578). Cooptation and information manipulation are considered as substitutes for repression (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2016; Tyson and Smith 2017). I suggest that repression still plays an integral part in survival strategies of modern autocrats. Without covert repression, they cannot induce opposition elites to soften their criticism, which they need them to do in order for modern autocrats to be able to manipulate public information. Modern autocrats have clearly added gentler survival strategies to their toolbox. Repression is more subtle under competitive authoritarianism (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014). It does not mean, however, that repression has been replaced by other strategies. Repression is still essential for those

gentler survival strategies to work.

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