Why Do Authoritarian Regimes Allow Citizens to Voice Opinions Publicly?

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Motivation: Paradoxical Tendencies

- On the one hand — limited freedom of speech (authoritarians strive for control over information)
Motivation: Paradoxical Tendencies

- On the other hand — some openness and policy responsiveness

- The case of China:

- More than 10% of urbanites complain about the government in regards to everyday matters

- 54.8% report that complaining helps solve their problems

- Issues of complaints: food & drug safety, public security, utilities, community environment, health care,...
Motivation: Authoritarianism with Public Communication

- Public communication: a process through which citizens publicly express preferences/opinions.

- Institutions that allow certain forms of public communication: media, internet, government websites, legislative hearings, People’s Political Consultative Conference, ...

- Citizens’ expressions are heard not only by the government, but also by each other.
Motivation: Puzzle

- Classical argument: complaints facilitate protests and cause social instability.

- Why would some authoritarian regimes allow people to publicly complain, while some others don’t?
Our Explanation

Potential benefits of allowing citizens to speak

- [1] to improve the policy based on public opinion

  Government’s strategic response to revealed public opinion mitigates the cost of public expression of discontent

- [2] to reshape citizens’ beliefs and to discourage them by revealing that citizens are divided on the issue

  Possibly tilt the cost and benefit of public communication in favor of openness
An Illustration of the Idea
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Public communication is NOT allowed.

Coordination effect: eg., Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2005), Hollyer, Rosendor and Vreeland (2011, 2013)

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Coordination Effect

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The Main Contribution and Argument

- **Coordination effect** through horizontal information flows
- **Discouragement effect** through horizontal information flows
- **Policy-adjustment effect** through vertical information flows
The Main Contribution and Results

- Equilibrium characterization:
  
  Openness $\uparrow$ when the government perceives more social heterogeneity.

- Institutional comparisons/ extensions:
  
  Sometimes, public communication $\succ_{Gov}$ private polling;

  Private channels of horizontal communication across citizens $\Rightarrow$ more openness.
Gov: chooses policy (proposing power)

Citizens: choose whether to protest (collective veto power)
Model Setup: Basic Idea

Gov: controls citizens’ abilities to communicate

Gov: chooses policy (proposing power)

Citizens: choose whether to protest (collective veto power)
Gov: controls citizens’ abilities to communicate

Citizens: speak to influence

Gov: chooses policy (proposing power)

Citizens: choose whether to protest (collective veto power)
Model Setup: Basic Idea

Gov: controls citizens’ abilities to communicate

⇒

Citizens: speak to influence (the gov and other citizens)

⇒

Gov: chooses policy (proposing power)

⇒

Citizens: choose whether to protest (collective veto power)
Model Setup: Preferences Over Policies

- A government, 2 citizens
- 2 policy options: the status quo policy $Q$, the reform policy $R$
- Each citizen $i$ can be discontent ($\bar{\omega}$) or content ($\omega$).

Table of Payoffs

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Model Setup: Information about Citizens’ Preferences

- Citizens’ preferences are privately known.
- With probability \( \frac{1}{2} \), a citizen is discontent (\( \bar{\omega} \)).

- Social homogeneity/preference correlation:
  If one of the two citizens is discontent, with probability \( \gamma \), the other one is also an discontent.
  \( \gamma > 0.5 \): positive correlation; \( \gamma < 0.5 \): negative correlation.

- \( \gamma \sim G(\gamma) \), the government observes it.
  Citizens only have a rough estimation: e.g., the expectation \( \bar{\gamma} = E(\gamma) \).
Model Setup: Timing

Complaining allowed
\[ \alpha = 1 \]

Complaining NOT allowed
\[ \alpha = 0 \]

t=0
Institutional design
Model Setup: Timing

Complaining allowed
\[ \alpha = 1 \]

Each citizen declares whether she is content (0) or discontent (1)

Complaining NOT allowed
\[ \alpha = 0 \]

No information is revealed

\[ m_i \in \{0,1\}, i = 1, 2 \]

\[ \emptyset \]

Institutional design

Public deliberation, if allowed
Model Setup: Timing

Each citizen declares whether she is content (0) or discontent (1).

\[ m_i \in \{0,1\}, i = 1, 2 \]

\[ x(t) \in \{Q,R\} \]

Complaining allowed

\[ \alpha = 1 \]

Complaining NOT allowed

\[ \alpha = 0 \]

No information is revealed

\[ x(\emptyset) \in \{Q,R\} \]

\[ x(0) \in \{Q,R\} \]

\[ x(1) \in \{Q,R\} \]

\[ x(2) \in \{Q,R\} \]

\[ t=0 \]

Institutional design

\[ t=1 \]

Public deliberation, if allowed

\[ t=2 \]

Policy adjustment
Model Setup: Timing

Complaining allowed \( \alpha = 1 \)

Each citizen declares whether she is content (0) or discontent (1)

\[ m_i \in \{0, 1\}, i = 1, 2 \]

Complaining NOT allowed \( \alpha = 0 \)

No information is revealed

\[ \emptyset \]

\[ x(\emptyset) \in \{Q, R\} \rightarrow \text{Collective action} \]

\[ x(0) \in \{Q, R\} \rightarrow \text{Collective action} \]

\[ x(1) \in \{Q, R\} \rightarrow \text{Collective action} \]

\[ x(2) \in \{Q, R\} \rightarrow \text{Collective action} \]

\[ t=0 \rightarrow \text{Institutional design} \]

\[ t=1 \rightarrow \text{Public deliberation, if allowed} \]

\[ t=2 \rightarrow \text{Policy adjustment} \]

\[ t=3 \rightarrow \text{Collective action} \]
Collective-Action Stage

- The probability of success of the collective action is $Z_n$ ($n = 0, 1, 2$ is the number of participants).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{with probability } Z_n & \quad R \text{ will be implemented} \\
\text{with probability } 1 - Z_n & \quad Q \text{ will be kept}
\end{align*}
\]
Collective-Action Stage

- Individual cost of protest: $k_i$ for citizen $i=1,2$
- The government suffers $\rho_n > 0$ ($n$: the number of participants)

Additional assumptions

- [1] Probability of success $\uparrow$ the number of participants:
  $Z_2 = 1 > Z_1 = \lambda > Z_0 = 0$

- [2] The cost of the gov $\uparrow$ the number of participants:
  $\rho_2 > \rho_1 > \rho_0 = 0$
Equilibrium Notion

- *Perfect Bayesian Nash Equilibrium*
- Focus on the “most informative” equilibrium
Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage

Lemma 1
A content citizen never joins the collective action;
A discontent citizen joins the protest with probability $p_0(\hat{\gamma})$, where $\hat{\gamma}$ is her belief about
$\gamma$: preference correlation of citizens /social homogeneity
Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage

\[ p_0(\gamma) \]

\[ p_0(0) \]

\[ 1 \]
Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage

\[ p_0(\gamma) \]

\[ \gamma^* \]

\[ \gamma \]

\[ p_0(0) \]

\[ 1 \]
Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage

\[ p_0(\gamma) \]

\[ p_0(0) \]

\[ \gamma_Q \]
Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage
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The behavioral change of a discontent citizen when she faces a discontent citizen
Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage

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Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage

The behavioral change of a discontent citizen when she faces a discontent citizen

The behavioral change of a discontent citizen when she faces a content citizen

\[ p_0(\gamma) \]

\[ p_0(0) \]

\[ \gamma_Q \]

\[ 1 \]

\[ \gamma \]
Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage

Event of **Discouragement** (when citizens have **opposite** preferences)

Event of **Coordination** (when citizens share the **same** preference)
Proposition 1:
The government allows public communication if and only if its perceived social homogeneity is small, i.e.,

\[ \alpha^* = \begin{cases} 
1 & \text{if } \gamma < \gamma^* \\
0 & \text{if } \gamma \geq \gamma^* 
\end{cases} \text{, where } 0 < \gamma^* \leq 1. \]
Results-Implications: the Case of Contemporary China

- Limited openness and issue-based complaints

- Openness (public communication) does NOT necessarily lead to policy improvement.

  The government strategically uses public communication to isolate those with opposite preferences.
Results (Institutional Comparisons/ Extensions)

- Public communication v.s. private polling?
  Characterize conditions under which public communication $\succ_{Gov}$ private polling.

- Private channels of horizontal communication across citizens $\Rightarrow$ more openness.
Conclusion

- A simple model with citizens’ horizontal communication and the government’s vertical learning
- Three driving forces: coordination effect, discouragement effect, policy-adjustment effect

- Openness ↑
  - when the government perceives more social heterogeneity;
  - when the chance of private communication among citizens increases.

- Characterize conditions under which the government prefers public communication to private polling.
Payoffs and Assumptions in Collective Action

Suppose $x = Q$. Recall that $u_i(Q) = 0$.

<table>
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<th>Participate ($i$)</th>
<th>Abstain ($i$)</th>
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<tr>
<td>$u_i(R) - k_i$</td>
<td>$\lambda u_i(R) - k_i$</td>
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$0 < \lambda < \min\{\frac{1}{L}, \frac{1}{2}\}$, and $F(k_i)$ is concave.
Characterizing Collective Action

- $k_i$ i.i.d. $[0, 1]$; $F(k_i)$ is concave.

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- Payoff gain:
  
  $\hat{\gamma} F(k^*)(1 - \lambda)L + (1 - \hat{\gamma} F(k^*))\lambda L - k_i$
  
  $= \hat{\gamma} F(k^*)(1 - 2\lambda)L + \lambda L - k_i$

- Fix point(s) problem:
  
  $k^* = \min\{\hat{\gamma} F(k^*)(1 - 2\lambda)L + \lambda L, 1\}$
Characterizing Collective Action

\[ k^* = \min\{\hat{\gamma}F(k^*)(1 - 2\lambda)L + \lambda L, 1\} \]
Characterizing Collective Action

\[ k^* = \min \{ \gamma F(k^*) (1 - 2\lambda) L + \lambda L, 1 \} \]
Equilibrium Selection

- $\gamma^{**} = \inf_{\gamma^* \text{ is an equilibrium}} \gamma^* > 0$ (uniquely and well defined)
- Among all the equilibria, $\gamma^{**}$ maximizes the government’s welfare.
- Among all the equilibria, $\gamma^{**}$ has the minimum level of openness.
A Signal-jamming Technology

Prob (1-c)  
Prob c
Related Papers

- Tradeoff between coordination effect and monitoring effect
  Lorentzen (2014) “China’s Strategic Censorship.” *AJPS.*

- Common-value coordination games
  Shadmehr and Bernhardt (2011) “Collective Action with Uncertain Payoffs: Coordination, Public Signals and Punishment Dilemmas.” *APSР*
“防民之口，甚于防川，川壅而溃，伤人必多，民亦如之。是故为川者，决之使导；为民者，宣之使言。”

——《国语·周语上》

To silence the populace is as grim a task as preventing flood. A blocked river would eventually inundate and cause great catastrophe; the same can be said of a stifled people. It is therefore wise to dredge the river to let it run free, and to enable the people to speak its mind.

—Discourses of the States (Guo Yu), around 500 BC
Effect of the Cost to Adjust the Policy

- Cases: Tunisia and Egypt in Arab Spring
- Beisseinger (2013), Beissinger, Jamal and Mazur (2012):
  - "The evidence also shows that most participants were motivated primarily by economic demands (and to a lesser extent, corruption), not by desires for civil and political freedoms"
- Mechanism: low ability to improve economic performances⇒
- no openness, no policy responsiveness, positive probability of revolution
A Related Project

“Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China” (with Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu)

Threat of collective action

Threat of tattling to upper levels of government

Identifying as loyal members of the Communist Party
Preference Correlation

- $x_i = \begin{cases} 
1 & \text{with probability } \frac{1}{2} \\
0 & \text{with probability } \frac{1}{2}
\end{cases}$

- $\gamma \in [0, 1]$

- Correlation coefficient $= \frac{\text{Cov}(x_1, x_2)}{\sigma_1 \sigma_2} = 2\gamma - 1 \in [-1, 1]$
(1) When the government’s private signal indicates that citizens are relatively heterogeneous (i.e., there exists an $\hat{\gamma} > 0$, whenever $\gamma < \hat{\gamma}$), it strictly prefers public communication to private polling; and

(2) when the government’s private signal indicates that they are relatively homogeneous ($\gamma \geq \gamma^{**}$) and knows that the citizens believe they are heterogeneous ($W(p_0(\bar{\gamma})) \leq \mu$), it strictly prefers private polling to public communication (and the outcome with no communication in the benchmark game).
When public communication is not allowed, with probability $h$, through certain private channels of communication, citizens can directly learn each other’s preference; 

With probability $1 - h$, their communication is not successful so that they still do not know each other’s preference.

Thus $h$ captures the effectiveness of citizens’ horizontal interaction without the government’s communication platform.