

Fuzzy Authoritarian Rule*

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Abstract

Many authoritarian regimes, including some of the world's most populous autocracies, such as Egypt and China, often do not make it clear what views, attitudes, and behaviors people may express openly without being sanctioned. We investigate how the uncertainty that this style of rule instills among people impacts the effectiveness of repression. We develop a novel argument about how it magnifies the effect of repression, not by fostering fear and anxiety among people, but by affecting how people understand what repression signals about a regime's resolve to sanction dissent. Our analysis, based on two laboratory experiments conducted in Egypt, confirms our argument and, in the process, challenges prominent behavioral arguments linking negative emotions to uncertainty. Our results imply that repression is least effective against acts of dissent that regimes are opposed to the most and are very clear about their resolve to repress them as a result.

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