

Ideology and Political Engagement under Autocracy

Ora John Reuter*

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Abstract

Autocracies vary widely in the extent to which they promote a coherent ideology, but the implications of regime ideology for authoritarian survival remain understudied. I argue that a divisive ideology can undermine regime stability by creating enemies and politicizing opposition-minded citizens. By hewing to a specific ideological stance, dictators risk polarizing society into competing camps, which can energize the opposition. I test this argument with an original assemblage of 192 public opinion surveys in electoral autocracies, containing over 300,000 survey responses across 52 authoritarian regimes. Using this data, I show that, on average, supporters of authoritarian regimes are significantly more engaged with politics than opposition supporters are. However, this "engagement gap" is much wider in regimes that lack a clear ideology. Using new data on ruling party ideology from the V-Party project, I show that in regimes with a definitive ideological bent, opposition supporters vote at much higher rates and are more interested in politics. These findings support the contention that depoliticizing society is one way that modern autocratic regimes neutralize the opposition and shore up the regime. And contrary to much existing literature, the findings imply that polarization can have destabilizing effects on autocracy. This suggests a political explanation for why so many contemporary autocrats eschew ideological dogma.

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

1 Introduction

There is considerable variation among autocracies in the extent to which citizens are politicized. Some regimes seek to mobilize the citizenry by engaging in political agitation, cultivating mass organizations, and promoting a coherent ideology for followers to rally around. Yet, many other regimes choose to sow political apathy, avoiding grassroots organization, draining politics from the public sphere, and downplaying ideology. This paper examines how depoliticization can be an effective survival strategy for contemporary autocrats. Specifically, it focuses on one aspect of depoliticization—the avoidance of a doctrinaire ideology—and explores how eschewing clear ideological stances can demobilize society and prevent opposition from arising.

While it has long been recognized that ideology can help legitimate authoritarian regimes (Linz, 1970; Levitsky and Way, 2022; Gerschewski, 2023), the downsides of ideology have received less attention from comparativists. I argue that by hewing to a particular ideology autocrats risk creating political enemies and politicizing opposition-inclined citizens. Because most political ideologies prescribe policy courses that create clear winners and losers, ideology makes enemies of those who stand to lose from the regime’s policy course. When the stakes of policy-making are raised and clarified in this way, the perceived benefits of political participation become greater. In addition, by taking distinct ideological stances, autocrats risk polarizing society into competing camps, which can solidify the opposition’s sense of identity and increase internal solidarity. When polarized, opposition supporters receive greater expressive benefit from participating on behalf of their “side” (or sticking it to the other side) (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018; Mason, 2018). Such polarization can also engender the feeling that one has a moral duty to participate in politics in order to aid the opposition movement. By maintaining a centrist political position, relying instead on catch-all or performance-based appeals to attract support, dictators can avoid these risks.¹

Thus, I argue that opposition supporters will be more politically disengaged in regimes without a coherent ideology. This can help explain variation in an understudied empirical pattern under electoral autocracy: that regime supporters are more politically active than opposition supporters. I argue that when regime leaders adopt a divisive ideological stance, they risk mobilizing the opposition and closing this gap.

I test these arguments using an original collation of 192 public opinion surveys, containing over 300,000 survey responses in 52 electoral autocracies, mostly in the 2000s and 2010s. I pair this data with new data from the V-Party project on the economic ideology of all autocratic ruling parties since 1975. Using this data, I document that, on average, there

¹These arguments apply best to electoral authoritarian regimes, where regime leaders endeavor to neutralize the opposition without liquidating it.

is a large discrepancy in political engagement between regime supporters and regime opponents in contemporary electoral autocracies.² I then show that regime opponents are less politically engaged—specifically less likely to vote in elections and less likely to express high levels of political interest—in regimes that lack a clear economic ideology. And crucially, I demonstrate the gap in political engagement between regime supporters and opponents is far larger in regimes that lack an economic ideology.

This research has several implications for the study of autocracy in the modern world. It offers a political explanation for why so many of today’s dictators eschew ideological dogma (Gurieiev and Treisman, 2019). When today’s dictators do turn to ideology it tends to be inchoate and incoherent, rooted more often in valence issues, populist demagoguery, and catch-all appeals. The prevalence of “thin” ideologies, such as populism, among contemporary dictators may have as much to do with political calculations about the downsides of “thick” ideology, as it does with cultural trends and social changes.

The research also arrives at some counterintuitive conclusions about the benefits of polarization under autocracy. In much of the world, the main obstacle facing opponents of autocracy is not the fact that society is bifurcated or that regime supporters are hardened against them. Rather it is simply that opposition leaders struggle to mobilize a critical mass of followers in a society that is apathetic about politics. In autocracies, polarization can be a generative force that solidifies and energizes opposition-minded citizens, thereby paving the way for the type of competition that destabilizes autocratic rule. This is not to say that polarization cannot contribute to the breakdown of democracy, or that it does not provide opportunities for autocrats to demonize their enemies and mobilize their own supporters, but, at a minimum, this paper shows that depoliticizing society by, among other things, jettisoning ideology is also a viable survival strategy for autocrats.

2 Ideology in Contemporary Autocracies

Political scientists know much more about the bases of authoritarian rule than they did 30 years ago. Much of this progress has been made possible by those who have called our attention to important differences in regime type. Geddes (1999) for example, has shown how the dynamics of democratization are shaped by whether the regime is based on the military, a party organization, or a single individual. Others have noted differences between regimes with strong elites institutions—such as ruling parties and legislatures—and those without (e.g. Gandhi, 2008; Svoboda, 2012; Magaloni, 2008; Meng, 2020). Scholars have also made an important distinction between regimes that hold semi-competitive elections and

²Importantly, this discrepancy remains while controlling for the presence of opposition boycotts and the imposition bans on individual opposition parties.

those that do not (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Knutsen, Nygård and Wig, 2017) Each of these research areas has advanced our understanding of authoritarian survival.

However, one dimension of authoritarian politics that has received less attention in the recent comparative literature is mass political mobilization (see Gerschewski (2023) for an important exception)³ Autocracies vary widely in the extent to which the regime seeks to politicize society by engaging in extensive agitation and propaganda, cultivating state-administered mass organizations and/or propagating a doctrinaire ideology. (Linz, 2000)⁴ While there is a large amount of scholarship that relates regime institutions to authoritarian survival, there is much less comparative work that considers the relationship between mass political mobilization and regime durability.⁵

This paper focuses on one aspect of mass political mobilization in particular: regime ideology. I define political ideology as a coherent system of political beliefs, which are structured in such a way to shape one’s political worldview and serve as a guide to political action across a range of issues.⁶ Ideology has received relatively little attention in the new literature on authoritarianism. One reason for this may be that it is rare among contemporary autocracies. As Guriev and Treisman (2019) have shown, the share of the world’s autocracies with an official ideology declined precipitously after the end of the Cold War, primarily because of the collapse of communist regimes. Instead of mobilizing the citizenry in support a particular ideology, Guriev and Treisman argue that today’s autocrats prefer to secure social support by convincing the public that they are performing well in office. While this is broadly true, there is still significant variation across autocracies in the the extent to which the regime adopts a clear ideological stance. Regimes such as Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and Iran stand out as examples of contemporary regimes with doctrinaire ideologies, while Jordan, Azerbaijan, and Russia until recently are examples of regimes that clearly eschewed

³This was not always the case. Early descriptive work on authoritarianism was heavily focused on the issue of mass mobilization. For example, in his classic treatment of authoritarianism, Linz averred that the most important distinction among autocracies was not the identity of the ruling group, but rather “the degrees of mobilization” that existed (1970, 260). This emphasis was also evident in modernization-based accounts of autocracy, which often hinged on the extent to which the ruling group was able integrate and channel newly mobilized political demands (e.g. Apter, 1965; Huntington, 1968) . Scholars of communist systems also devoted enormous energy to understanding patterns of political recruitment and participation in those regimes (e.g. Friedgut, 1979; Hough, 1976) Similarly, many early studies of post-colonial Africa focused on mass mobilization by the new autocracies emerging there (e.g. Wallerstein, 1961; ?; ?)

⁴These elements do not always feature together, as some regimes seek to mobilize grassroots support without an ideology, or may espouse an ideology while demobilizing society (as did certain Cold-war era, right-wing Latin American regimes) Still, the V-Party data used in this paper suggests that these mobilizational attributes often do go together. For example, The intensity of regime economic ideology is correlated at $\rho=0.45$ with the grassroots organizational capacity of the ruling party and at $\rho=0.39$ with a measure that taps the ruling party’s penetration of social organizations.

⁵The most studied aspect of this question is party organization, and several recent studies have shown how mass-based party organization can fortify autocracy (Slater, 2010; Handlin, 2016; Reuter, 2022). But there is very little theoretical or comparative work on other aspects of mass mobilization, such as social organization, political education, political agitation, or regime ideology.

⁶There are many definitions of ideology in the literature, though as Gerring (1997) notes “coherence” is common to all of them and constitutes a minimal criterion. My definition of ideology hews closest to the political definitions of ideology, which have been developed by scholars of voting behavior, such as in Campbell (1980, p. 192-193) and McClosky (1964).

ideology.

An important question is how the presence of a clear ideology, or the lack thereof, affects regime durability. It has long been argued that ideology can provide authoritarian regimes with legitimacy (Linz, 1970; Gerschewski, 2023). In totalitarian regimes, an ideological mission was used to justify the brutal repression of political enemies. Levitsky and Way (2022) argue that a regime ideology can instill esprit de corps in regime cadres, binding them more firmly to the regime. Ideology can also help cultivate a base of devoted supporters who develop a shared sense of purpose with the regime. A number of studies have shown that contemporary autocracies are more likely to attract support from those who share the regime's policy preferences (Roberts, 2003; Colton and Hale, 2009; Remmer, 2012; Neundorff et al., 2025).

But if ideology is an unalloyed good for dictators, then why do so many avoid it? The share of regimes with official ideologies plummeted after the end of the Cold War, and, as the data presented below shows, many electoral authoritarian regimes adopt a centrist economic stance. One explanation could be that it is increasingly hard to enforce a single system of political values in a world where the barriers to accessing alternative viewpoints are low. Television, which for decades has been the primary vector of authoritarian propaganda, is rapidly declining as a news source in most parts of the globe.

Another consideration is that hewing to specific ideological stance comes with serious downsides for autocrats. A doctrinaire ideology can straitjacket regime leaders in times of crisis or value change. For example, while the Soviet Union's reliance on ideology helped justify the system, it also produced rigidity and dogmatism, which made it hard for state leaders to respond to problems within the system and ultimately complicated efforts to reform it.

Ideology can also backfire for autocracies because concrete ideological stances are politically divisive. By hewing to a particular ideology, regimes risk politicizing society, creating political enemies, and motivating the opposition to participate in politics. This consideration is particularly relevant in electoral authoritarian regimes, the dominant form of autocracy in the world for the past 35 years. In such regimes, public opposition is permitted, so the authorities must contrive to neutralize it. These arguments are developed in greater depth below, but before turning to this discussion, I first review the scholarship on political engagement in authoritarian regimes in order to clarify the stakes of the theory.

3 The Engagement Gap under Autocracy

An important yet understudied pattern in electoral authoritarian regimes is that opposition supporters tend to be less politically engaged than regime supporters are. Some scholarship on civic activism under autocracy has alluded to this discrepancy (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011; Erpyleva and Magun, 2014), and several country studies of autocratic elections have pointed out that the opposition turns out at lower rates than do regime supporters (Klesner, 2001; Chen and Zhong, 2002; Simpser, 2013; Reuter, 2021). However, there is little work that theorizes about this gap and no comparative data on it.

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the engagement gap using data compiled from 192 surveys in electoral autocracies (described in greater detail below). Column 2 of Table 1 shows that supporters of autocratic regimes exhibit significantly higher levels of interest in politics than do opponents of the regime.⁷ Column 1 suggests that this gap is mostly unique to autocracies; government supporters in a sample of 40 democracies are not significantly more interested in politics than government opponents are.

Table 1: Political Interest Gap by Regime Type

	Democracies	Autocracies
Average Political Interest		
of Government Supporters	2.71	2.51
of Government Opponents	2.78	2.19
Interest Gap	.07	.32
Number of Surveys	40	140
Number of Countries	40	41

Note: Interest is measured on a 4-point scale, ranging from "no interest" to "very interested." Surveys for democracies are from the Comparative Study of Election Systems, Module 5. Data for autocracies is described in section 5

Table 2 shows a similar pattern with respect to voting. On average, regime supporters turn out to vote at considerably higher rates than does the opposition. The mean difference between these groups is 8 percentage points.⁸ And consistent with the pattern evinced in Table 1, there is no such turnout gap in democracies.

In some autocratic elections the regime-opposition turnout gap can be a chasm. In the 2016 State Duma elections in Russia for example, 79% of Vladimir Putin’s supporters turned out, compared to just 62% of his opponents. As Table 3 shows, large discrepancies in turnout between Putin’s supporters and his opponents have been a regular feature of Russia’s elections since the mid-2000s. This is also true for political interest; over the past 15 years regime supporters have tended to profess more interest in politics than the opposition does.

⁷Many political surveys ask respondents about their level of political interest using virtually identical question formulations. This makes this question item a useful one for measuring political engagement across multiple autocratic regimes.

⁸Importantly, the data in Table 1 exclude elections where a significant opposition party was banned or boycotted the election.

And, as the table shows, these gaps gave grown as the regime became more autocratic over the course of the 2000s and 2010s.

Table 2: Turnout Gap by Regime Type

	Democracies	Autocracies
Average Turnout		
of Government Supporters	87%	76%
of Government Opponents	86%	68%
Turnout Gap	1	8
Number of Surveys	40	165
Number of Countries	40	48

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Note: Table excludes elections with a significant opposition boycott. Surveys for democracies are from the Comparative Study of Election Systems, Module 5. Data for autocracies is described in section 5

Table 3: Political Engagement Gaps Grew As Russia Became More Autocratic

Year	Election Type	Regime	Turnout Among Yeltsin/Putin Supporters	Turnout Among Yeltsin/Putin Opponents	Turnout Gap	Average Political Interest Among Yeltsin/Putin Supporters (4pt scale)	Average Political Interest Among Yeltsin/Putin Opponents (4pt scale)	Interest Gap
1995	Duma	Democratic	82	83	-1	2.82	2.78	0.04
1996	Presidential	Democratic	86	85	1	2.78	2.92	-0.14
1999	Duma	Democratic	82	78	4	3.2	3.07	0.12
2000	Presidential	Democratic	88	84	4			
2003	Duma	Autocratic	72	70	2	2.97	2.86	0.1
2004	Presidential	Autocratic	83	73	10	2.94	2.91	0.04
2008	Presidential	Autocratic	82	73	9	3.1	3.06	0.04
2011	Duma	Autocratic	73	63	10			
2012	Presidential	Autocratic	84	74	10	3.1	2.88	0.22
2016	Duma	Autocratic	63	46	17	2.9	2.64	0.26
2018	Presidential	Autocratic	79	62	17			
2021	Duma	Autocratic	53	39	13	2.62	2.48	0.14
2024	Presidential	Autocratic	75	45	29	2.74	2.46	0.28

Sources: Russian Election Studies (various years). The 2011 and 2018 surveys are Levada Center Post-Election Omnibus Surveys

This political engagement gap is a boon to autocrats because oppositions will find it harder to defeat autocrats if their supporters are disengaged. As a matter of arithmetic, the opposition stands a better chance of inducing incumbents to step down by beating them in elections—an occurrence that is surprisingly common in autocracies (Magaloni, 2006; Frantz, 2018; Hern, 2024)—if their supporters are motivated to vote. Opposition forces are also more successful if their supporters are willing to engage in protest and civic activism (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011; Gorokhovskaia, 2019). Without access to economic and political resources, the opposition’s tendency toward political apathy is particularly problematic. As summarized by Shefter (1984) in his classic study of partisan mobilization, “The fewer resources any group of outsiders commands, the more it will have to rely upon the weight of numbers to achieve its political demands, and hence it will depend upon mobilizing, organizing as large a proportion of its potential supporters as possible to make its weight felt.”

Political engagement also facilitates the building of organizations and organizational ca-

capacity (e.g. party-building, the construction of protest movements, vote-monitoring organizations) which forms the basis for anti-regime collective action. (LeBas, 2011; Lussier, 2016). Getting opposition-minded voters to participate in politics is similarly necessary if the opposition hopes to gain a toehold in local government, which can be used as a lever to eat away at regime dominance (Lucardi, 2016; Szakonyi, 2024).

Generalized political engagement tends to create positive feedback loops. Studies show that political interest and participation in political organizations tend to correlate with other types of political activity that are potentially dangerous for autocrats, including protest, political organizing, and becoming informed (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, Dalton 2017). Voting, for its part, has been associated with other types of civic engagement (Werfel 2017, Oser 2017). And while I am aware of no empirical studies on this topic, it seems intuitive that the act of voting might lead to demands for real democracy.

Despite the importance of the engagement gap under autocracy, there are relatively few systematic studies of it. Recent work has made advancements in understanding overall patterns of turnout under autocracy (e.g. Blaydes, 2010; Letsa, 2020; i Coma and Morgenbesser, 2020), but there are few theories about the turnout gap. One possible explanation is that the regime targets its supporters with selective incentives, such as vote-buying offers or threats to vote. This is undoubtedly an important factor but likely not the full story. Recent work indicates that, in certain settings, incumbents have difficulty efficiently identifying their supporters (Hicken and Nathan, 2020; Schneider, 2019; Frye, Reuter and Szakonyi, 2025). What is more, the debate about whether clientelism is targeted at core or swing voters lives on and there is surprisingly little evidence that parties try to monitor voter behavior in order to enforce compliance (see Hicken and Nathan (2020) for a review of the many studies informing these debates). Finally, clientelist mobilization might help explain some of the turnout gap, but is less helpful for understanding disparities in political interest or non-voting participation.

Another possible explanation for this turnout imbalance is electoral fraud. (Birch, 2010; Simpser, 2013; Frantz, 2018) If opposition supporters are disproportionately more likely to believe that elections are fraudulent, they may believe that voting is not worth it. However, this logic has several problems. For one, by this instrumental reasoning, regime voters should also view voting as pointless. The outcome of authoritarian elections, fraudulent or not, appears foreordained to everyone—regime and opposition alike—so neither type of voter should feel less pivotal than the other.

In addition, a long line of research in democracies has shown that political participation is primarily determined by expressive and duty-based motivations. Instrumental motivations play a decidedly lesser role (e.g. Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Brennan and Hamlin, 1998;

Blais, 2000; Enos and Fowler, 2014). Similarly, recent research on voting in autocracies has shown that duty-based explanations of participation outperform instrumental explanations (Letsa, 2020; Reuter, 2021). In Russia, a field experiment carried out by Peisakhin, Rozenas and Sanovich (2020) found that opposition voters in Moscow were unswayed by turnout appeals that emphasized the closeness of local elections and hence the ability of voters to determine the outcome.

But if political participation is motivated by civic duty under autocracy this does not necessarily help the opposition. Reuter (2021) argues that because autocratic regimes penetrate and politicize the state, opposition supporters are less likely to feel moral obligations to the state. Accordingly, regime opponents do not feel duty-bound to vote in state-sanctioned elections. This is an alternative explanation for the turnout gap that I build upon in the argument below.

In sum, oppositions under autocracy have a hard time mobilizing their followers. Their supporters have fewer instrumental reasons to participate in politics and are less likely to feel that political engagement is a duty. This puts the regime at an inherent mobilizational advantage. And yet, sometimes, the opposition does participate actively and some opposition voters do feel duty-bound to do so. This variation calls for an explanation: why does the engagement gap narrow in some settings and yawn in others?

4 Theory

While ideology can help legitimate authoritarian regimes and attract supporters, it also has a number of downsides. These downsides manifest most clearly in contemporary autocracies, which hold multiparty elections and/or rely on genuine mass support to stay in power (Guriev and Treisman, 2019). For autocrats, taking a clear ideological stance risks politicizing society and creating enemies. This section builds this argument and shows how it can help us understand variation in the engagement gap described above.

Many contemporary autocracies use depoliticization as a survival strategy. Such regimes neutralize threats to their rule by encouraging society to withdraw from politics. They do this for a number of reasons. Politicized citizens are more likely to seek out political information, take note of government malfeasance, and punish the regime for it. When citizens are involved in politics, they are more likely to view the abnegation of rights as affront; when they are disengaged, restrictions on rights are often met with a shrug. Mass politicization can also create accountability pressures that undermine the regime. Thus, Linz believed that some autocrats would prefer to sow apathy in order to “..avoid pressures to make good on the promises they made” (1970, 271).⁹ For many contemporary autocrats,

⁹This view was echoed by modernization theorists, who believed that socio-economic development would

deemphasizing ideology is an important aspect of depoliticization.¹⁰ And while ideology could undermine autocracy in a number of ways, I focus on one danger in particular: the risk that adopting a clear ideology can generate political opposition and motivate opponents to participate more actively in politics.

To see this argument, it is useful to return to the definition of ideology presented earlier. Ideology is understood here as an interconnected set of political beliefs, which are structured in such a way to shape one's political worldview. The more coherent the ideology the more it can provide a clear and consistent framework that serves as a guide to action across a wide range of political issues. This also means that relevant actors can predict, based on the ideology's underlying principles, the expected policy course of the politicians or parties that adhere to a given ideology. By staking out a well-defined set of programmatic policy positions, parties necessarily highlight differences between their own positions and those of their opponents. These differences invariably form the basis for conflict and contestation. In the context of autocracy, a dictator who adopts a left-leaning economic program necessarily creates enemies in the business community and potentially the middle class. A regime that promotes religious fundamentalism necessarily alienates secular elements in society.

Because political ideologies prescribe policy courses that create clear winners and losers, ideology risks politicizing previously apathetic citizens under autocracy. Those who stand to lose from the regime's policies would have more incentive to engage in opposition politics. By maintaining a centrist political position, relying instead on catch-all or performance-based appeals to voters, dictators can avoid these risks.

The promotion of ideological conflict, by contrast, risks polarizing society into competing camps. This can strengthen the opposition by increasing their internal solidarity and thereby improving their capacity for collective action (LeBas, 2011). In turn, ideological polarization can often transform into affective forms polarization, "us" vs "them" distinctions that further entrench a sense of identity among the opposition and fuel animus toward the regime. (Webster and Abramowitz, 2017; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016)

To see more clearly how these considerations might politicize opposition supporters and

lead to social differentiation, which would lead to new political demands. Many thought this would lead to democracy (Lipset 1960, Lerner 1961), while others thought that it would just lead to political instability (Huntington 1968). Either way, the idea was that mass participation places unbearable demands on autocratic leaders and that these demands could undermine the regime.

¹⁰Dictators have more freedom to avoid programmatic politics than leaders in democracies do. In democracies, parties face competitive pressures to bundle their issue positions in simple low-dimensional spaces (i.e. promote a programmatic ideology). Doing so facilitates the legislative discipline that is necessary to defeat legislative rivals (Cox and McCubbins, 2007; Aldrich, 1995). It also enables parties to develop clear, informative party labels that help voters identify the candidates who share their policy views (Kitschelt, 2000). Parties that fail to do these things risk being outdone by those that do. Furthermore, because ideological platforms help candidates attract voter support 'for free', candidates without programmatic platforms are forced to spend more resources on voter mobilization (Ashworth and De Mesquita, 2009). Dictators face fewer such competitive pressures. Through repression, abuse of the administrative apparatus, and control of the information space, autocracies exert outsized control on the contours of political competition. This gives them more freedom to eschew an ideological platform, should they so choose.

narrow the engagement gap with regime supporters, it is helpful to consider the effects of a regime’s ideological position-taking on several theoretical drivers of political participation, which can be divided into three traditions: 1) instrumental theories, which emphasize the concrete costs of participating and the extrinsic benefits that can be achieved through participation, 2) expressive theories, which emphasize the consumption benefit of participation, and 3) duty-based theories, which emphasize the moral obligation to participate that some citizens feel. By taking a clear ideological stance, regime leaders risk motivating opposition participation via each of these theoretical pathways.

First, promoting a clear programmatic platform that creates policy winners and losers will necessarily motivate those who stand to lose. They will be incentivized to participate in politics in order to prevent the implementation of policies adverse to their interests.¹¹ Politics becomes more interesting when it is a struggle over divergent ideas and the outcome of that struggle appears consequential. A centrist or catch-all position makes it harder for the opposition to energize society in resistance to the regime’s policies because such policies generate fewer grievances.¹²

Second, since ideological distinctions can drive polarization, ideological regimes risk fostering in-group affinity among the opposition.¹³ The stronger a group’s in-group affinity the more likely that members of that group will derive expressive utility (i.e. pleasure) from participating in causes that align with group interests. (Brennan and Buchanan, 1984; Wiese and Jong-A-Pin, 2017). The “us vs them” dynamics unleashed by polarization can also lead members of the opposition to derive a consumption benefit from expressing their antipathy toward an outgroup (i.e. the regime and its supporters). A large number of studies find that affective polarization and negative partisanship are associated with higher levels of voter turnout and other forms of participation (e.g. Mason, 2018; Hartevelde and Wagner, 2023; Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018).¹⁴

Finally, by accentuating “us vs them” distinctions, ideological polarization risks turning opposition to the regime into a political identity (Mason, 2018). This dynamic can motivate political participation by instilling in opposition supporters a moral imperative to aid their ingroup. Communitarian political theorists have long argued that individuals develop ethical commitments to those groups that form important parts of their identity. Hur (2022) has

¹¹This is akin to increasing the size of the B term in Riker and Ordeshook (1968)’s Calculus of Voting model.

¹²For example, in standard theories of social choice, centrist political positions—those located at the position of the median member of society—minimize total disutility across society Black (1948)

¹³In a recent study of Kuwait, Tavana (2025) shows how the use of ideological appeals by opposition candidates helped strengthen affinity bonds among different ethnic groups and build the opposition movement. In the US congress, Park et al. (2022) shows how committee leaders introduce use voting rules that activate the liberal-conservative dimension in order to enforce voting discipline. This has the effect of driving broader polarization in Congress and society.

¹⁴Polarization can increase political participation by activating expressive motivations or by evoking ethical obligations to one’s ingroup, as discussed below.

shown how such commitments instill a moral duty to participate in politics on behalf of one’s ingroup. By fostering ideological polarization autocrats risk creating identity bonds among the opposition, which can engender the feeling that one has a moral duty to participate in politics in order to aid the opposition movement.

Building on these arguments, the primary proposition that I advance in this paper is that opposition supporters will be more politically engaged in regimes that have a coherent ideology. Furthermore, I argue that the engagement gap between regime and opposition supporters will be smaller in regimes that have an ideology. While a regime’s ideology can also motivate regime supporters to participate in politics via the mechanisms sketched above, the net effect among opposition supporters is larger because regime supporters under autocracy exhibit higher baseline levels of political engagement.¹⁵ There are, for instance, diminishing returns to the effect of ideology on turnout because voters can only vote once. Reuter (2021), for example, has argued that supporters of authoritarian regimes are more likely to feel that voting is a civic duty because they are more likely than the opposition to revere the state and think of voting as a patriotic duty.¹⁶

5 Data

5.1 Surveys from Authoritarian Regimes

This paper seeks to test two complementary hypotheses: 1) opposition supporters will be more politically engaged in ideological autocracies and 2) the gap in political engagement between regime supporters and the opposition will be narrower in ideological autocracies. Testing these hypotheses requires comparing average levels of political engagement by opposition and regime supporters in a large number of electoral autocracies. The empirical focus is on electoral autocracies because the theory sketched above applies best to this type of autocracy and because the existence of multi-party elections facilitates the measurement of both regime support and political engagement (discussed below). A large number of autocracies is required because a regime’s ideology does not change substantially over time; therefore, most of the inferential leverage in this study must come from comparisons across autocracies.

In order to address these challenges, I have assembled a dataset containing 192 public

¹⁵The potential threats to regime stability posed by a politicized opposition are greater than the regime-stabilizing benefits of a politicized pro-regime base. The status quo favors incumbents, so to the extent that societal depoliticization reduces the ability of actors to mobilize for political change, it will be beneficial to the regime. A politicized opposition is a necessary precondition for most of the things that regime opponents can do to effectively challenge autocrats, such as stage large protests, organize at the grassroots, and contest elections.

¹⁶Other prominent theories of turnout under autocracy also predict higher baseline turnout by regime supporters, either due to differences in fraud perceptions (e.g. (Frantz, 2018)) or because opposition voters wish to signal their disapproval with the regime by abstaining ((De Miguel, Jamal and Tessler, 2015))

opinion surveys from 52 electoral autocracies. The bulk of this data is from well-known, publicly available survey barometers, such as AfroBarometer, Americas Barometer, AsiaBarometer, ArabBarometer, CaucasusBarometer, SouthAsiaBarometer, LatinoBarometer and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. In addition to the autocracies selected from these regional survey barometers, I added several stand-alone post-election surveys that I was able to obtain from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. The criteria for including a survey in the sample was that 1) it was held in an electoral autocracy, 2) the survey included key questions on political engagement and regime support (discussed below) and 3) the survey was held within 3 years of an election 4) the most recent election in the country was won by the same regime that was in power at the time of the survey.¹⁷

The data collection process entailed the following steps 1) selecting autocratic survey-years according the procedure above, 2) standardizing the measurement of key demographic and political variables across surveys (see below), and 3) appending all datasets together into a pooled assembly of 192 surveys. The pooled data contains 305,584 survey responses from 52 countries. Survey sample sizes range from 430 to 4273. The mean number of respondents is 1591 and the median is 1200. The median number of surveys per country is 3. Several countries, such as Morocco and Algeria, are surveyed 8 or more times because they are included in both the Arab and Afro Barometer. Russia is also included 9 times given the regular availability of election surveys in that country. Fifteen countries have only one survey included. Most of the survey data is from the 2000s and 2010s. The median survey year is 2014. Only 12 surveys come from before the year 2000.¹⁸ The most recent survey is from 2024.

Table 4: Key Descriptive Statistics on Survey Assemblage

Characteristic	Statistic
Countries	52
Surveys	192
Number of Respondents	305,584
Median Sample Size	1,200
Median Number of Surveys per Country	3
Median Survey Year	2014

The main challenge in using multiple different surveys for testing comparative theories of political behavior is finding surveys that ask the same questions in identical (or nearly identical) formulations. In this application, it was necessary to locate surveys that asked the same questions about both regime support and political engagement. Most political surveys

¹⁷This latter criteria is necessary for analyzing the relationship between regime support and voter turnout. Surveys are excluded if there was a change of regime during an election or in the time between an election and the survey. In these surveys, questions about incumbent support typically refer to the new regime, not the one in power at the time of the election.

¹⁸These are from the LatinoBarometer, the Seligson Archive, and the first wave of the Afrobarometer. The major regional barometers did not begin surveying regularly until the 2000s.

ask some question about respondent’s approval of the incumbent government. In the pooled data, I include three different measures of regime support 1) questions that tap respondents approval for the performance (or activities) of the incumbent government, 2) a question that taps the party affiliation of the responding, coding those who affiliate with the ruling party (or parties) as regime supporters, and 3) questions about trust in the President or Prime Minister. Over half the surveys in the sample include all of these questions and all of the surveys include at least one of these questions. The most commonly included question is the question about approval of the incumbent government, and this is the primary measure of regime support that I use in the paper. In most surveys, this variable is measured on a 4 point ordinal scale, which I dichotomize to create a binary measure of regime support.¹⁹ This is the primary measure of regime support that I use. When this measure is missing I substitute the binary measure of regime support constructed on the basis of party affiliation and when both the regime approval and party affiliation measures are missing, I substitute a binary version of the executive trust measure.²⁰

For testing the hypothesis above, it is also necessary to have identical questions about political engagement across many surveys. One measure that is present in almost all political surveys is a question about turnout in elections. My first measure of political engagement is equal to one if the respondent reported turning out in the most recent national elections. The second measure of political engagement is political interest. Most political surveys—especially post-election surveys—begin with a question to gauge the respondents’ level of interest in politics. Because the global survey research community tends to share best practices, the phrasings of these interest questions are remarkably similar across the surveys selected for this study. Almost all of them also use a four point scale to capture levels of political interest.²¹ Question formulations do differ slightly for some of the included surveys, asking respondents about the extent to which they “follow” politics, rather than about how interested they are in politics. I account for these any other differences in question wording with fixed effects for the barometer wave/survey type. In sum, the two main dependent variables are 1) a binary measure of reported turnout in the most recent election, and 2) a four point scale of political interest.

5.2 Independent Variables

The main hypothesis in this paper is that the engagement gap between regime and opposition supporters is larger in regimes without a clear ideology. In order to measure ideology, I use

¹⁹A small number of surveys use a 5 point scale of regime support. For these countries, I code those who answer 4 or 5 on the scale as regime supporters, while those who answer 1, 2 or 3 as non-supporters. Results are robust to dropping those who select the middle category from the analysis.

²⁰This is done for 19 countries, and results are robust to dropping these countries.

²¹Several Afrobarometer waves that used 3 point scales were dropped from analysis for this reason.

an expert-coded assessment of the ruling party’s position on the economic left-right scale from the V-Party dataset. While regimes can have various types of ideologies, economic ideology has several advantages for this study. First, economic ideologies, such as socialism or liberalism, are thick’ ideologies of the type that I theorize above. They are rooted in a relatively coherent set of first principles from which policy direction can be derived. These policy directions are divisive, creating clear winners and losers. Economic ideologies have traditionally been among the most common type of ideology adopted by regimes and they are relatively easy to observe by experts. This makes it possible to gather replicable measures of a regime’s economic ideology.²²

This measure is drawn from the V-Party dataset, an expert-coded dataset that provides information on all political parties that have sat in national parliaments in independent countries between 1970 and 2019(Düpont et al., 2022). Following the approach of the the V-Dem Project, V-Party contains expert-coded assessments on various aspects of party ideology, identity, positions, and organization.(Coppedge et al., 2019) Using this methodology, 665 experts coded 1955 parties across 1560 elections in 169 countries Düpont et al. (2022). The data is coded for each party in each country for each election year. The modal number of coders for each election was 4.

In order to code the economic ideology of the ruling party, I first identified the ruling party for each of the autocracies in my dataset and extracted V-Party, party-level data for those parties. To measure economic ideology, I use the V-Party Economic left-right scale measure (*v2pariglef*), which asked coders to ”Please locate the party in terms of its overall ideological stance on economic issues.” ²³ The raw coder responses range from 0 (far-left) to 6 (far-right). it take the absolute value of this measure to creat an ordinal measure of economic ideology that ranges from 0 to 3, where 0 correspondents to ”Centrist” and 3 correspondents to having a strong economic ideology (whether left or right). I also use a dichotomous version of this variable, coded one if the ruling party has any identifiable economic ideology, zero otherwise (i.e. centrist). These are the two main independent variables used in the analysis. Of the 175 surveys where this measure is available, 51 regime-years are coded as centrist, 83 as center-right/center-left, 39 as left/right, and 2 as far left.

The expert-coded data methodology utilized by the Varieties of Democracy project has come under justifiable criticism in recent years. (e.g. Little and Meng, 2024) The most significant objections hinge on concerns about generalized coder bias and coder disagreement over the meaning of concepts. These are well-founded concerns, but the economic ideology

²²Although I focus on economic ideology to test my theory, the arguments above would also apply well to exclusionary forms of ethnonationalism and religious sectarianism.

²³The coder clarification reads as follows: Parties on the economic left want government to play an active role in the economy. This includes higher taxes, more regulation and government spending and a more generous welfare state. Parties on the economic right emphasize a reduced economic role for government: privatization, lower taxes, less regulation, less government spending, and a leaner welfare state.

measure used here is less vulnerable to these concerns, as it is easily observable to experts and the left-right economic scale is likely understood in similar terms by most experts. This is evidenced by the fact that this variable has the lowest level of coder disagreement among all V-Party measures of party issue positions.

I also include a number of important control variables in all models below. First, since opposition participation will almost certainly be depressed during elections when opposition forces boycott the election, I included a dummy variable equal to one if any significant opposition party boycotted the election. This variable is drawn from the NELDA dataset and updated by the author for more recent elections. (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). The same is true if a significant opposition party is banned, so I also include a dummy variable equal to one if any significant political parties or major party candidates were banned from competing in the election (also from NELDA). Third, I also include a control for whether voting was compulsory in the country at the time (a relatively rare phenomenon in autocracies). Finally, all models control for regime competitiveness at the time of the election, using the ordinal Polity V score.²⁴

At the individual level, all models include controls for the age, gender, and education level of the respondent. The latter is standardized across surveys with a binary variable equal to one if the respondent has higher education, zero otherwise.

6 Modeling Strategy

Empirical analysis consists of two modeling approaches. First, I examine the effect of the regime’s economic ideology on opposition political engagement by subsetting the survey data only to regime opponents. I then proceed to run OLS regression models with turnout or political interest as the dependent variable. Since the turnout variable is binary, these are linear probability models. Crucially, these models are estimated with two-way clustering of standard errors at both the country level and at the level of the survey. This accounts for the obvious dependence between observations within surveys and for the possibility that survey-level errors are correlated within countries.²⁵

Second, I directly examine the gap in engagement between regime and opposition using an estimated dependent variable (EDV) model. This model proceeds in two steps. It first estimates the effect of regime support on turnout/political interest in each survey using the following equation:

²⁴Results are unchanged using the polyarchy measure from the Varieties of Democracy Project. They are also unchanged when using the vote share of the ruling party.

²⁵Results are robust to clustering only at the level of the survey. Results are also robust to collapsing the dataset to survey-level means and running analysis only at the survey level.

$$y_i = \alpha_j + \beta_j \text{RegimeSupport}_i + \theta_j Z_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where y_i is the dependent variable of interest (turnout or political interest, depending on model), *Regime Support* is a binary measure of regime support, and Z_i are other individual-level predictors of political engagement (i.e. age, education, gender, and, in some models, urban status).

In the second stage, I explore how a regime’s economic ideology (and other survey-level covariates) affects β_j , the regression coefficient on regime support in the first stage models. This is done with the following model:

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_j = & \delta + \gamma_1 \text{EconomicIdeology}_j + \gamma_2 \text{CompulsoryVoting}_j + \gamma_3 \text{OppositionBoycott}_j \\ & + \gamma_4 \text{MajorPartyBanned}_j + \gamma_5 \text{PolityScore}_j + \varepsilon_j \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

where $\hat{\beta}_j$ from the first stage is regressed on the survey-level independent variables. In other words, this two-stage model first estimates the effect of regime support on turnout/political interest in each individual survey and then passes those regression coefficients on to a linear regression at the survey-level, where they become the dependent variable. The goal is to estimate variation in the effect of regime support on turnout/interest.

The errors on $\hat{\beta}_j$ vary across countries, influenced among other things by different sample sizes. The standard errors of these estimates are, of course, known and can be used to adjust the second-stage standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity. Specifically, I use the FGLS procedure proposed by Hanushek (1974) and improved by Jusko and Shively (2005) and Lewis and Linzer (2005), which uses weights to account for sampling error in the first stage estimates of $\hat{\beta}_j$. For an application of this EDV modeling approach in political science see Brown, Earle and Gehlbach (2009) and Kasara and Suryanarayan (2020).²⁶

7 Results

Table 5 shows results from the first set of regressions, which restricts the sample only to opposition supporters. In Models 1 and 2, we see that *Economic Ideology* is positively signed and statistically significant, indicating that in regimes with economic ideology, opposition turnout is higher. Since these are linear probability models, substantive effect sizes can

²⁶This EDV [procedure] is implemented in Stata using the `-twostep-` routine developed by Giesecke and Kohler (2024). Equivalent estimates can be achieved (see appendix) using multilevel models with cross-level interactions, but presentation of many such interactions is unwieldy. As Achen (2005) shows, the two step procedure used here performs just as well as more complex multilevel models and has the advantage of lending itself to simple OLS interpretation and post-regression diagnostics.

be interpreted directly from estimated coefficients: in regimes with an economic ideology, turnout among opposition supporters is 12 percentage points higher. We obtain a similar result using the ordinal measure of *Economic Ideology*. The substantive effect is very large. Moving from the minimum value of that variable (no ideology) to the maximum (far-left/far-right ideology), increases the turnout propensity of the average opposition supporter by 6.8 X 3=20 percentage points. These substantive effects are shown in Figure 1 The results in this model hold while controlling for the presence of opposition boycotts and bans.

Table 5: Regime Ideology and Political Engagement by Opposition Supporters

VARIABLES	(1) Turnout	(2) Turnout	(3) Interest	(4) Interest
Age	0.006*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)
Education	0.032** (0.013)	0.034** (0.013)	0.333*** (0.020)	0.334*** (0.019)
Male	0.020** (0.008)	0.020** (0.008)	0.261*** (0.020)	0.260*** (0.020)
Compulsory Voting	0.136*** (0.023)	0.147*** (0.022)	-0.211*** (0.032)	-0.176*** (0.028)
Opposition Boycott	-0.090*** (0.027)	-0.102*** (0.027)	-0.034 (0.045)	-0.046 (0.046)
Major Party Banned	-0.087*** (0.022)	-0.065*** (0.024)	0.032 (0.048)	0.059 (0.057)
Polity Score	0.002 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)	-0.009* (0.005)	-0.006 (0.005)
Economic Ideology (Binary)	0.120*** (0.028)		0.162*** (0.036)	
Economic Ideology (Ordinal)		0.068*** (0.014)		0.078*** (0.023)
Constant	0.302*** (0.034)	0.300*** (0.034)	2.474*** (0.077)	2.460*** (0.076)
Observations	88,796	88,796	76,798	76,798
R-squared	0.121	0.122	0.139	0.139
Survey Type Fixed Effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Surveys	165	165	125	165
Countries	48	48	38	38

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

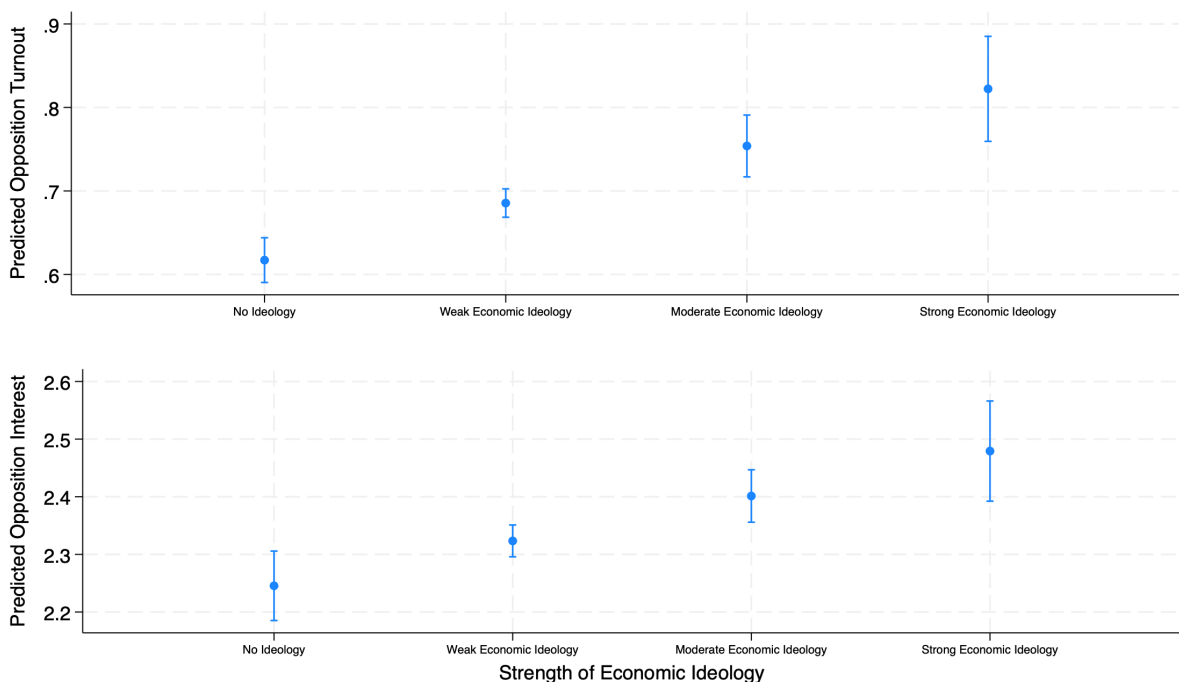
Sample is subset only to regime opponents in each survey.

OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors, clustered on survey, in parentheses

Models 3 and 4 take the four point scale of political interest as the dependent variable. Here we see that the opposition's interest in politics is higher in regimes that have an economic ideology. The effects are significant, but more modest in size than the turnout estimates. If the regime has an economic ideology, political interest increases by .16 (4 percentage points) on the four point interest scale.

Table 6 shows models analogous to those in Table 5, but subsets the data only to regime supporters. For turnout, the effect of regime ideology is still positive, but the substantive effect sizes are far smaller. The coefficient on the binary ideology measure is less than half

Figure 1: Effect of Ideology on Opposition Political Engagement under Autocracy



the size of the coefficient among opposition groups and is significant has a p value of 0.054. In columns 3 and 4, we see that the presence of a regime ideology has no effect on political interest among regime supporters. Regime supporters are no more likely to be interested in politics when the regime has an economic ideology. On the whole, then these models appear to suggest regime ideology politicizes the opposition more than it does regime supporters.

Tables 7 and 8 examine these engagement gaps directly. Table 7 does this using a simple comparison of means. To do this for turnout, I calculate the share of regime supporters in each country that reported voting and subtract from this quantity the share of opposition supporters that reported turning out. This is the difference in turnout rates shown in Table 2, and it ranges from a minimum of -0.05 to maximum of 0.33. A similar procedure is used for the political interest gap. I use a t-test to determine whether these gaps are larger in regimes without an economic ideology. Table 7 indicates that it is: the *difference* in turnout rates between regime and opposition is 7 percentage points larger in regimes without an economic ideology. A similar procedure is used for political interest and I find that the gap in political interest (which ranges from -.31 to .57) is .08 units larger on average in regimes without an economic ideology.

Table 8 examines these differences in a multivariate setting, using the two-stage model described above. As described in the previous section, the dependent variable in these models is a set of regression coefficients from survey-by-survey regressions of turnout/political interest on regime support. As such, the dependent variable can be interpreted as the gap in turnout/political interest between regime supporters and opponents in a given country.²⁷ The results in these models show that the engagement gap between regime supporters and

²⁷Conditional on individual-level covariates.

Table 6: Regime Ideology and Political Engagement by Regime Supporters

VARIABLES	(1) Turnout	(2) Turnout	(3) Interest	(4) Interest
Age	0.006*** (0.000)	0.006*** (0.000)	0.004** (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)
Education	0.018 (0.013)	0.017 (0.013)	0.261*** (0.025)	0.261*** (0.024)
Male	0.022** (0.009)	0.022** (0.009)	0.261*** (0.018)	0.262*** (0.018)
Compulsory Voting	0.042 (0.034)	0.034 (0.039)	-0.363*** (0.045)	-0.349*** (0.047)
Opposition Boycott	-0.059* (0.034)	-0.065* (0.036)	-0.267*** (0.061)	-0.274*** (0.063)
Major Party Banned	-0.054* (0.027)	-0.051* (0.027)	-0.048 (0.055)	-0.051 (0.057)
Polity Score	0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.010 (0.007)	-0.010 (0.007)
Economic Ideology (Binary)	0.053* (0.027)		0.044 (0.048)	
Economic Ideology (Ordinal)		0.024* (0.014)		-0.009 (0.029)
Constant	0.393*** (0.021)	0.397*** (0.021)	2.552*** (0.081)	2.553*** (0.082)
Observations	137,394	137,394	114,622	114,622
R-squared	0.069	0.068	0.109	0.108
Survey Type Fixed Effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Surveys	165	165	125	125
Countries	48	48	38	38

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Sample is subset only to regime supporters in each survey.

OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors, clustered on survey, in parentheses

Table 7: Economic Ideology and the Engagement Gap

	Regime Has Any Economic Ideology?		Difference
	No	Yes	
Average Turnout Gap	0.136 (48)	0.069 (117)	0.067*
Average Political Interest Gap	0.166 (36)	0.089 (89)	0.078*

* $p < 0.05$. Number of surveys shown in parentheses.

the opposition is significantly larger in regimes without an economic ideology.

Table 8: Ideology and the Engagement Gap

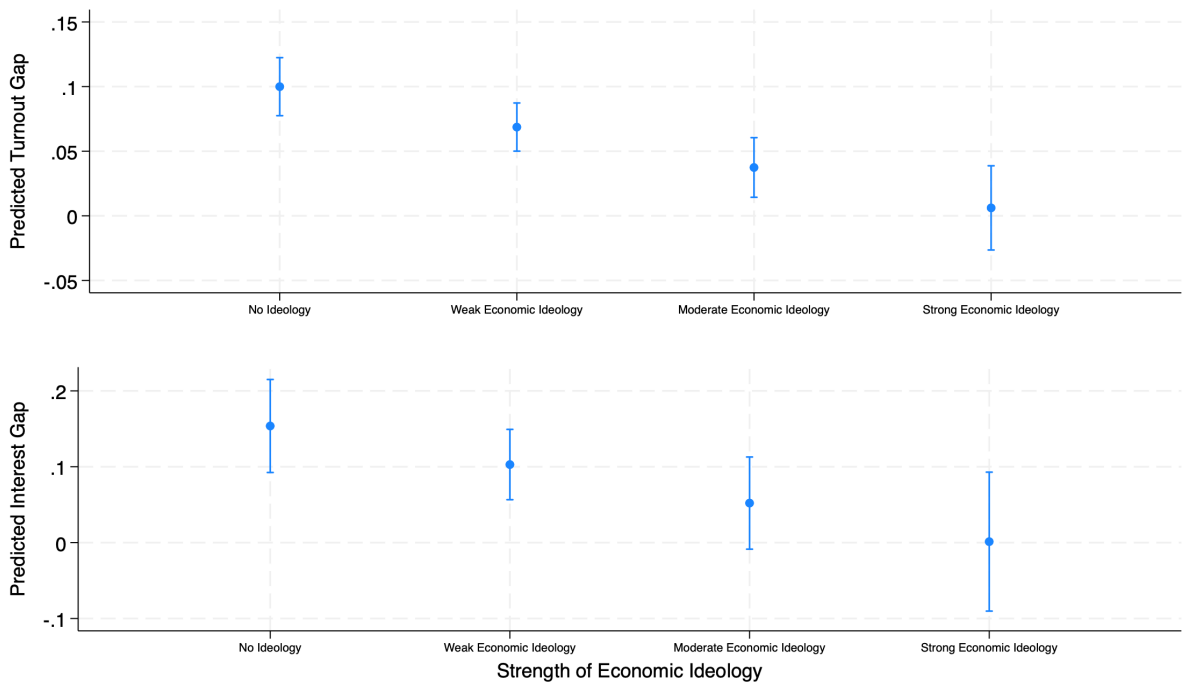
VARIABLES	(1) Turnout Gap	(2) Turnout Gap	(3) Interest Gap	(4) Interest Gap
Compulsory Voting	-0.053*** (0.020)	-0.039* (0.020)		
Opposition Boycott	0.023** (0.011)	0.028** (0.011)	-0.112*** (0.034)	-0.106*** (0.034)
Major Party Banned	0.037*** (0.013)	0.031** (0.013)	-0.027 (0.039)	-0.038 (0.039)
Polity Score	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.000 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.004)
Economic Ideology (Binary)	-0.062*** (0.011)		-0.088*** (0.032)	
Economic Ideology (Ordinal)		-0.041*** (0.007)		-0.045** (0.020)
Constant	0.109*** (0.011)	0.100*** (0.009)	0.191*** (0.033)	0.168*** (0.029)
Observations	165	165	125	125
R-squared	0.453	0.467	0.451	0.440
Survey Type Fixed Effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Surveys	165	165	125	125
Countries	48	48	38	38

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Cell entries are coefficients from the second stage of an estimated dependent variable (EDV) model, where the dependent variable is $\hat{\beta}_j$ from Equation 2. First stage estimates of the effect of regime support on turnout/interest are not shown. Robust standard errors, clustered on country, in parentheses

Substantively, the model suggests that the difference in turnout between regime supporters and opponents is six percentage points higher in regimes without an economic ideology. These differences are depicted graphically in 2 For the ordinal measure, we see that the turnout gap is 12 percentage points larger in regimes without an economic ideology, relative to those with far left/right ideologies. Similarly, the results in models 3 and 4 show that the interest gap is significantly depressed in regimes with an ideology. In fact, in regimes with a strong economic ideology, there is no gap. In sum, these models suggest regime ideology does more to motivate the opposition than it does to motivate the regime supporters.

Figure 2: Effect of Ideology on Engagement Gaps under Autocracy



8 Conclusion

Most contemporary autocracies eschew official ideology, and many avoid taking ideological stances altogether. Instead, they mobilize support using non-ideological messaging, such as catch-all platforms, populist rhetoric, and performance-based appeals ((Guriev and Treisman, 2022)). This paper has investigated some of the consequences that the avoidance of ideology has for regime stability. I have argued that avoiding ideology can help contemporary autocrats demobilize society and hamstring opposition movements. Specifically, I argue that autocrats who propagate a doctrinaire ideology risk creating political enemies and politicizing opposition-inclined citizens. Ideological position-taking energizes those who stand to lose from the regime’s chosen policy course. And by staking out a divisive ideological position, autocrats risk bifurcating society into competing camps, which which can solidify the opposition’s internal solidarity.

I argued that this can help explain why we observe that supporters of authoritarian regimes are more politically engaged than are opposition supporters. Using an original assemblage of 192 public opinion surveys in electoral autocracies, I showed that opposition supporters are more politically engaged—having higher levels of political interest and participating more in elections—in regimes that adopt a centrist political position. Moreover, the gap in political engagement between regime and opposition supporters is much larger in non-ideological regimes. In regimes with a left or right economic ideology, opposition-inclined voters are considerably more engaged.

These findings shed light on the relationship between ideology and regime stability under autocracy. It has long been recognized that autocrats use ideology to legitimate their

rule (Linz, 1970; Gerschewski, 2023) and to bind ruling coalitions together (Levitsky and Way, 2022). But the destabilizing effects of ideology are less appreciated. Indeed, the results in this paper accord with other recent quantitative studies demonstrating that, among contemporary autocracies, ideological position-taking is negatively correlated with regime durability (Reuter, 2022).

That autocrats recognize the downsides of ideological position-taking is evidenced by the fact that ideological purity has been on decline in authoritarian regimes over the past 40 years. Today's autocrats often promote belief systems that are inchoate and amorphous, as in the case of populism. The causes of this change are a topic for future research. But if we are to believe Guriev and Treisman that today's autocracies are less repressive than those of the past, then it stands to reason that ideology would be less prevalent. After all, if dictators are not going to liquidate their enemies then they can ill afford to energize their enemies' supporters by giving them a cause to rally around.

Finally, this research reminds us of polarization's salutary effects in authoritarian regimes (LeBas, 2018). The main thing holding back opposition forces in many of the world's autocracies is not the intensity of conflict between opposing camps, but rather the absence of politics altogether. Polarization can foster the type of political conflict that is necessary to energize the opposition.

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Appendix

Coming Soon!