Public Opinion in Authoritarian Regimes

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September 29, 2025

Abstract

Despite lacking competitive elections and strong protections for political freedoms, politics in authoritarian regimes is still influenced by the opinions of everyday people. What do these opinions look like? Why do they matter? Research from various authoritarian regimes suggests that many citizens hold sophisticated and nuanced views about politics. People can distinguish between different political actors and often see through propaganda. Nonetheless, many still express support for autocratic leaders. Preference falsification may explain some of these patterns, but in many cases, high popular approval for autocrats remains meaningful. Despite preference falsification, public opinion still matters not only because regime support is self-reinforcing – the façade of support encourages conformity and deters dissent – but also because it influences broader political dynamics. Authoritarian governments devote vast resources to shaping public opinion through censorship and propaganda, build institutions to absorb and deflect grievances, and adjust policies in response to public sentiment. In short, even without competitive elections, public opinion still significantly affects the actions of political actors, making it crucial to understand politics in authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: Public Opinion, Authoritarian Regimes, Regime Support, Preference Falsification, Propaganda, Censorship

Word Count: 6,461

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1 Introduction

Traditional portrayals of autocracies often depict them as regimes where intimidated citizens harbor private resentment toward their leaders but refrain from speaking openly about politics, while autocratic leaders largely disregard public opinion when making political decisions due to the lack of free and fair elections (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018; Jiang and Yang 2016; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994; Scott 1990; Young 2019). Such perspectives question the substantive significance of public opinion research in autocratic regimes: Why should public opinion matter if it rarely influences political outcomes under authoritarian rule? More fundamentally, do citizens in autocracies even hold clear and coherent views about politics at all?

There are elements of truth to this portrayal in some circumstances, but increasing empirical evidence presents autocrats as enjoying widespread trust and genuine popularity, even surpassing their democratic counterparts (Guriev and Treisman 2020). This popularity is attributed in part to rapid economic development (Luo and Przeworski 2019), territorial gains such as Russia's annexation of Crimea (Greene and Robertson 2022), or public security provision (Przeworski 2023), and in part to state-led efforts to manipulate the information environment through propaganda, censorship, ideological indoctrination, and the creation of personality cults (Guriev and Treisman 2022). Yet, skeptics often challenge the methodological validity of public opinion research in these contexts. Can we trust public opinion data collected through surveys in autocracies, whether conducted in person or online? Are these seemingly high levels of support robust or can they evaporate quickly during political crises (Lohmann 1994)?

Despite this longstanding skepticism, public opinion research has paradoxically flourished over the past decade, driven in part by the causal inference revolution in political science. But what exactly have we learned from this burgeoning body of work? This chapter reviews the literature on public opinion in autocracies and its political significance. We argue that citizens in autocracies can and do hold meaningful political opinions, and that support for autocrats is often genuine, even as preference falsification poses serious challenges for accurate measurement, and even as it remains possible for this support to collapse suddenly in Soviet-style cascades.

Ultimately, however, we suggest that scholars should move beyond efforts to pinpoint precise levels of support and instead focus on how public opinion interacts with strategies of governance and regime survival. Research clearly demonstrates that the appearance of popular support is itself crucial to authoritarian survival, and many authoritarian elites act on the belief that public sentiment influences political outcomes. Accordingly, much can be learned about authoritarian politics by examining how public opinion both shapes and is shaped by autocratic rule.

2 Why Public Opinion Matters in Autocracies

Public opinion research is a long-standing element of political science. Even in democracies, scholars have debated whether individuals hold well-formed views on political issues or primarily follow cues from political and social elites (Zaller 1992). Others have focused on the extent to which government policies respond to and reflect public opinion (Burstein 2003), or how to best measure what the public thinks (Berinsky 2017). Research has established that attention to politics varies across individuals, that some issues lend themselves more readily to stable public views, and that elites play a significant role in shaping opinion. Overall, however, this literature suggests that citizens in democracies can and often do form coherent political opinions (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017), and that policy tends to be at least somewhat responsive to public sentiment (Soroka and Wlezien 2009).

Yet, in authoritarian regimes, it was still often assumed that citizens did not have the information needed to form coherent political views, were too afraid of repression to engage politically, and thus were largely apolitical and highly susceptible to top-down propaganda (Przeworski 2023). This perspective is partly shaped by the methodological difficulties of studying what people think in a context where they may be too afraid to articulate their views. It may also reflect an emphasis in the literature on traditional totalitarian regimes, in which powerful states dominated the masses through coercion and propaganda, or military-led bureaucratic authoritarianism, in which the political sphere was closely controlled by a small clique of elites embedded in state in-

stitutions. However, as competitive authoritarian regimes became more widespread following the end of the Cold War, research on authoritarianism began to pay more attention to the relevance of popular politics. In these regimes, elections were contested, opposition parties could mobilize, protests were relatively common, media had some degree of freedom, and everyday people could express their views with some openness (Guriev and Treisman 2022). Even in single-party regimes like China and Vietnam, modernization and the rise of the internet empowered ordinary people, albeit within tighter constraints.

Importantly for our purposes, research shows that citizens in autocracies can and do hold sophisticated political opinions. For instance, Nicholson and Huang (2023) find that while the Chinese public generally supports President Xi Jinping, a majority disapproved of the constitutional amendment removing presidential term limits. Similarly, Yang and Zhu (2025) show that during the COVID-19 policy crisis in 2022, the Chinese public updated their policy preferences in response to changing conditions, but not their negative evaluations of the government's pandemic performance, demonstrating a nuanced and discerning public. Research from countries including Russia and Turkey indicates that people are not just passive consumers of authoritarian propaganda, but often recognize and ignore attempts by their governments to sway their perceptions of political affairs (Aytaç 2021; Rosenfeld 2018). This discernment is also reflected in how people decide to participate politically in these contexts. For instance, research from Cameroon, Egypt, and Zimbabwe illustrates how many people think carefully about the decision to vote, drawing on their assessments of electoral quality and the political implications of voting, as well as personal ideology and their sense of civic duty (Croke et al. 2016; Letsa 2020; Nugent and Brooke 2023). In terms of ideology, the absence of a mature multiparty system in some authoritarian regimes means that the public can be less familiar with political concepts prevalent in democracies, such as the ideological spectrum (Pan and Xu 2018). Nevertheless, Pan and Xu (2018) affirm that even in China, with its single-party system, Chinese individuals still express coherent political preferences across various policy domains, mirroring ideological patterns observed in democratic contexts. Together, this body of evidence underscores the relevance of studying public opinion

in authoritarian regimes.

As this research expanded, scholars developed a better understanding of the importance of popular politics for all authoritarian regimes. High public support for the regime, whether genuine or fabricated, can generate a self-fulfilling prophecy that reinforces regime legitimacy and survival. For instance, Buckley et al. (2024) use survey experiments in Putin's Russia with a list experimental design to show that support for autocrats is indeed endogenous: higher perceived support encourages individuals to conform to social norms, increasing not only their expressed support but also their genuine support for the regime. Furthermore, even those who are not sincerely persuaded by the perception of the autocrat's widespread popularity can nevertheless increase their reported support through preference falsification, inadvertently reinforcing the illusion of widespread popularity and sustaining the self-fulfilling dynamic (Hale 2022). This self-reinforcing process can operate through rational calculation: when high popular support conveys the impression that the ruling party is invincible, the optimal strategy for ordinary citizens may be to comply rather than defect to the opposition (Magaloni 2006). Thus, visible popular support is important for allowing autocrats to ward off mass uprisings. High perceived support for the regime also creates additional collective action problems for potential elite challengers, deterring them from openly rebelling due to the perceived unpopularity of opposition movements (Chen and Xu 2017). By contrast, visible popular discontent can facilitate coordination among these elites to mount a coup attempt against the autocrat (Johnson and Thyne 2016).

As a result, authoritarian rulers often care about keeping at least a proportion of the public happy (Malesky, Todd and Tran 2023). Even in more repressive autocracies, regimes will invest substantial resources into figuring out what the public wants, and they make efforts to both satisfy the public's preferences and persuade the people of their popularity and good governance (Carter and Carter 2023; Truex 2016). To understand politics in authoritarian regimes, it is therefore important to understand what everyday people think about politics, where these opinions come from, and how they shape the regime's governance strategies. But what does this public opinion look like in these contexts, and how do we know? The next section addresses these questions.

3 Do Citizens of Authoritarian Regimes Like Autocrats and Autocracy?

In line with the authoritarian politics literature's focus on the survival and stability of autocracies, research on public opinion has tended to focus on mass attitudes toward dictators, their regimes, and more general support for democracy versus autocracy. The most common method for studying these topics continues to be directly asking people through surveys. In fact, this research has proliferated over the past two decades. The World Values Survey, barometer surveys in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East, and survey firms such as Gallup and Pew have regularly polled people living in dozens of authoritarian regimes worldwide. The increasing accessibility of online convenience samples has also facilitated surveys by scholars interested in reaching populations in countries that would otherwise be difficult to access. As a result, we now have a rich and growing body of data on how individuals in authoritarian regimes express their political attitudes.

A clear pattern to emerge from this body of data is that autocrats tend to be relatively popular (Guriev and Treisman 2020), and more so than their counterparts in democracies. Using data from more than 140 countries polled by Gallup between 2007 and 2016, Guriev and Treisman (2020) found that autocrats, on average, received favorable approval ratings from 54 percent of respondents, compared to 43 percent in democracies. This favorability varies substantially across authoritarian regimes. In China, for example, surveys using direct questions consistently report high levels of support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Dickson 2016; Tang 2016). In Russia, approval ratings for Vladimir Putin have often exceeded 70 percent, even when measured using indirect techniques designed to reduce social desirability bias (Frye et al. 2017), though this support has fluctuated over time. In contrast, approval of leaders in other authoritarian or hybrid regimes, such as Zimbabwean President Mnangagwa and Turkish President Erdoğan, has recently fallen below 50% (Afrobarometer 2025; Pew Research Center 2024). In general, however, many autocrats appear successful in cultivating or maintaining favorable public perceptions, though

important questions remain about the sincerity of these expressed attitudes.

Another clear pattern from these survey data is that people in autocracies do not hold uniform attitudes toward various actors and institutions within the regime. Public satisfaction tends to be lower for legislatures than for executives (Williamson and Magaloni 2020), mirroring a similar pattern in many democracies. Trust in the bureaucracy or local governments may likewise diverge from views of the autocrat (O'Brien and Li 2006), and people often report varying levels of approval of specific ministers and political figures within the regime (Williamson 2024). At the same time, people in these countries often express favorable views of security and legal institutions, such as the military, police, and judiciary (Lotito and Joyce 2024). These differences suggest that residents of autocracies do not necessarily view the regime as a unitary actor; rather, they differentiate among its various components.

Although expressed support for autocrats is often high, many citizens paradoxically reject authoritarianism in principle and endorse democracy as a superior system of government (Claassen 2020; Wike et al. 2017). Such pro-democracy attitudes remain robust, whether measured through general questions about democracy, specific evaluations of representative institutions versus strongman leaders, or survey experiments testing different aspects of democratic commitments. (Neundorf et al. 2024; Steenekamp and Du Toit 2017). These pro-democracy attitudes are also relatively strong across different regions and among different demographic groups within countries (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018). The remainder of this chapter offers several explanations for this puzzling discrepancy, including preference falsification (Kuran 1991; Tannenberg 2022), propaganda, and institutional arrangements that lead many in authoritarian countries to perceive their own systems as relatively democratic (Wang and Yeung 2025; Williamson 2021; Yeung 2023), as well as the possibility that citizens support certain repressive policies despite their nominal preference for democracy (Tsai 2021; Xu, Kostka and Cao 2022; Yang 2025). In short, the growing literature on authoritarian public opinion reveals a more nuanced picture than the traditional secret resentment model suggests.

3.1 The Problem of Preference Falsification

Despite a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the authoritarian public, a central challenge remains in studying public opinion in autocracies: To what extent can we trust the attitudes expressed by people living in authoritarian regimes about their political systems? When respondents report approval of their leaders or describe their country as democratic, are these opinions genuine, or the result of preference falsification to avoid punishment under repressive regimes (Kuran 1991)?

Researchers have sought to use creative methods to avoid preference falsification by asking sensitive questions indirectly. Some of these studies document significant divergences between indirect and direct measures, suggesting that many people self-censor more critical views. For example, Carter, Carter and Schick (2024) used list experiments in China to show that direct questions about CCP approval can overstate support by 20 to 40 percentage points. Jiang and Yang (2016) also found evidence of self-censorship in China using variation in expressed attitudes around local political purges. However, not all studies find strong evidence of preference falsification. List experiments implemented by Frye et al. (2017) in Russia suggested relatively little preference falsification regarding attitudes toward Putin. Likewise, an implicit attitudes test used by Truex and Tavana (2019) in Egypt showed high support for President El-Sisi, consistent with more direct questions about the dictator's public approval. Using an experiment embedded in Facebook ads distributed in Jordan, Williamson (2024) also found evidence of moderately high support for King Abdullah.

More recent work has taken a cross-national approach. Tannenberg (2022) uses data from 37 African countries to show that respondents in autocracies, but not in democracies, provide more positive assessments of the regime when they believe that the government sponsored the survey. In contrast, Shen and Truex (2021) find relatively little evidence of widespread self-censorship by analyzing nonresponse to sensitive questions in the World Values Survey. Compared to democracies, many autocracies show similar levels of nonresponse, with notable exceptions in more repressive or closed regimes, such as China and Morocco, where the executive is unelected. Other

research aligns with this finding that increasing repression triggers more preference falsification. For example, survey respondents in Hong Kong engaged in more self-censorship following the implementation of the National Security Law (Kobayashi and Chan 2022).

Thus, how intensely people falsify their preferences appears to depend on the context, with falsification most likely to be disruptive for public opinion research in the most heavily repressive and invasive regimes. In other autocracies, the extent of this falsification may be less severe than is commonly assumed. As such, when used cautiously, surveys can provide valuable insights into public opinion in autocracies. It can be difficult to pinpoint exact levels of support for political actors, particularly the autocrat, but positive attitudes expressed in surveys will often be indicative of meaningful public approval. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the utility of direct questions will decrease as the fear of repression increases, and it may be difficult to determine how pervasive this fear is in a given country or at a given time. As a result, it remains useful for scholars to use indirect methods alongside direct ones when gauging public attitudes in autocracies.

4 The Politics of Public Opinion in Autocracies

Although preference falsification poses a major challenge for public opinion research in autocracies, we argue that the importance of public opinion in autocratic regimes extends beyond concerns about whether individuals falsify their support for the regime. Given widespread normative support for democratic values, maintaining public support has become a central pillar of modern authoritarian rule, as autocrats seek to legitimize their rule in the eyes of the public (Chu, Williamson and Yeung 2024; Guriev and Treisman 2022; Neundorf et al. 2024). This goal shapes strategies for contending with both elites and the masses, regardless of whether the public expressions of support are genuine or fabricated. It is therefore misguided to dismiss public opinion research in autocracies solely based on concerns about preference falsification, without carefully considering what such data reveal about broader political dynamics in these contexts.

We illustrate this point by highlighting research that explores how autocrats seek to manipulate public opinion, how authoritarian institutions interact with the public's political views, and how public opinion informs policymaking in autocratic settings.

4.1 How Autocrats Manipulate Public Opinion

Given the risks associated with losing popular support, it is no surprise that autocracies invest heavily in using their power to cultivate approval by manipulating public opinion. Other chapters in this handbook have documented in detail the legitimation of autocratic regimes, the role of ideology in shaping public opinion and loyalty, and the use of propaganda and censorship to manipulate the information environment (Grauvogel and von Soest 2024; Michaelsen and Ruijgrok 2024). Without repeating those discussions, we highlight three key strategies here.

First, authoritarian governments often make sincere efforts to persuade the public to support the regime and leadership as a whole, as well as specific policies. Day to day, these efforts incorporate communication strategies that range from careful framing of key issues and highlighting endorsements from reputable experts (Pan, Shao and Xu 2022; Yang and Zhu 2025) to shifting blames toward internal and external rivals (Rozenas and Stukal 2019), using agenda setting power to divert public attention to more favorable issues (Aytaç 2021), and flooding the information space with cheerleading content to amplify pro-regime sentiment (King, Pan and Roberts 2017). Reflecting longer-term efforts to manage public support for democracy, some autocrats attempt to persuade the public to understand democracy in authoritarian terms, whereas others invest in claims that their governance already embodies traditional democratic principles (Chu, Williamson and Yeung 2024).

Second, beyond persuasion, autocrats sometimes strategically use emotional appeals to cultivate loyalty, such as evoking pride and patriotism toward the country or mobilizing anger and hatred toward rivals (Greene and Robertson 2022; Mattingly and Yao 2022). Finally, when changing public opinion proves difficult, autocrats may resort to heavier-handed manipulation strategies instead, such as hard propaganda (Huang 2018) and wide-reaching censorship (Yang 2025), that

induce preference falsification and deter dissent or noncompliance. Beyond these explicit strategies to bolster regime support, however, public opinion also subtly permeates many institutional arrangements and policy decisions in authoritarian regimes.

4.2 Institutions and Public Opinion in Autocracies

It is now widely accepted that institutionalization contributes to the prolonged survival of authoritarian regimes (Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012). Earlier scholarship and conventional wisdom often viewed institutions such as elections and parliaments in autocracies as mere window-dressing, a naive façade designed to convince the public that the regime is democratic (Schedler 2002). Over the past two decades, however, a wealth of literature has highlighted the substantive role of authoritarian institutions in facilitating power-sharing among elites (Meng 2020; Svolik 2012) and co-opting key supporters (Blaydes 2010). As such, scholars increasingly recognize that authoritarian institutions can serve distinct purposes from their democratic counterparts by allowing autocrats to manage elite politics more effectively. Yet, growing evidence suggests that these institutions also play a significant role in absorbing public grievances and acting as channels through which public opinion influences elite politics.

One important role for institutions is to improve the ability of autocrats to gather information about public preferences and grievances. For example, much like democracies, legislators can use their positions to engage with constituents and listen to their opinions. After doing so, they can either influence policy through the legislative process or communicate their constituents' preferences to more central decision-makers at the top of the regime (Malesky and Schuler 2010; Manion 2015; Truex 2016). Elections can also assist the regime in understanding the public's preferences. By monitoring how many people turn out to vote in the election and for whom they cast their votes, the regime can gain insights into its standing with the public. In particular, elections reveal where supporters and opponents are concentrated, enabling the regime both to adjust policies to match the public's preferences more closely and carry out targeted repression more precisely (Blaydes 2010; Davenport 2007; Lueders 2022; Magaloni 2006; Miller 2015).

However, autocrats cannot always deliver on public expectations. When they fall short, propaganda may have limited power to convince citizens of their effectiveness. Eventually, many people begin to see through the rosy portrayals presented in state media. In such cases, institutions can help autocrats address the challenges of public opinion. Drawing on evidence from Jordan as well as cross-national studies, Williamson (2024) shows that how credibly autocrats share power with other political elites in their cabinets, legislatures, or bureaucracies affects how exposed they are to mass opposition when the regime's governance becomes unpopular. The more credible it is that these other elites influence decision-making and policy outcomes, the more likely it is that the public blames these other elites rather than the autocrat. Similarly, Beazer and Reuter (2019) and Rosenfeld (2018) use data about opposition control of local governments in Russia to demonstrate that Russians punish the ruling party more where its control of the local economy is more direct. In other words, how institutions structure power in authoritarian political systems can influence how the public attributes responsibility for governance outcomes. Knowing this, autocrats can be incentivized to share power more credibly when they are concerned about the ability of their regime to produce outcomes that are popular with the public (Williamson 2024).

Finally, institutions themselves can be used to persuade the public that their regimes are somewhat democratic. Elections are particularly significant in this regard. Although not free and fair, the vast majority of autocracies hold regular elections (Svolik 2012). How well these elections align with democratic standards affects how likely people are to perceive the regime as legitimate (Aarslew 2024; Reuter and Szakony 2021; Williamson 2021). People may discount electoral fraud or other election issues because of partisan motivated reasoning (Windecker, Vergioglou and Jacob 2025), as in democracies; in addition, perceptions of democratic quality can be influenced by propaganda (Guriev and Treisman 2022; Yeung 2023). Nonetheless, how closely autocrats imitate democratic practices through their institutional structures has implications for their ability to secure public support.

Institutions other than elections can also have these effects. For instance, passing policies

through a legislative body or allowing courts some leeway to issue fair rulings can help the regime to present its governance as more consistent with democratic practices (Chu and Williamson 2025; Truex 2016). Other institutionalized forms of public participation and constituency service can likewise give citizens a voice in ways that shape their perceptions of the government, whether formalized channels for submitting requests to officials or to offer input on policy implementation, even for repressive practices like censorship enforcement (Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Truex 2014; Yang 2024). Thus, rather than serving only as window dressing, authoritarian institutions shape how citizens evaluate the regime and function as mechanisms through which public opinion is absorbed and transmitted within authoritarian institutions.

4.3 How Public Opinion Influences Authoritarian Governance

Alongside the mediating effects of institutions, public opinion can also shape governance decisions and policy outcomes directly in autocracies, especially in regimes that strategically attempt to preempt opposition by satisfying the public's preferences. A growing body of research demonstrates that public sentiment plays a significant role in influencing foreign policy decisions in autocracies (Aksoy, Enamorado and Yang 2024; Weiss 2013; Weiss and Dafoe 2019), and that foreign policy successes, in turn, bolster domestic support for the regime (Greene and Robertson 2022). One key finding in this literature is that single-party autocracies often behave remarkably similarly to democratic regimes, incurring comparable public costs when they fail to follow through on foreign policy threats (Weeks 2014; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). More importantly, public outrage over foreign policy issues can become one of the few focal points for collective mobilization against the regime. As such, managing public opinion on foreign affairs, through a strategic combination of policy concessions and suppression of radical voices, is essential to maintaining authoritarian stability (Weiss 2013).

Another area where public opinion can actively influence authoritarian governance is environmental protection. Alkon and Wang (2018) uses a quasi-experiment in Beijing to show that air quality significantly affects public support for the regime, which in turn prompts government

responses to address the issue. Ironically, many of the root causes of environmental pollution, such as the reliance on polluting industries for economic growth, are not easily resolved. As a result, public pressure often leads to a novel form of government behavior: performative governance (Ding 2020), in which authorities stage high-profile efforts to signal responsiveness to public concerns while doing little to address the underlying problems. This dynamic illustrates how public opinion can drive policy reactions that are more symbolic than substantive in authoritarian contexts.

In fact, even repression in authoritarian regimes can, paradoxically, reflect public desire for punishment and retribution (Tsai 2021). While repression is an indispensable tool for most autocrats to suppress political dissent and remain in power, it is generally assumed to be unpopular with the masses. As a result, conventional wisdom on state repression focuses on the conditions under which repression successfully silences dissent versus when it provokes backlash against the regime (Davenport 2007). However, recent public opinion research challenges this trade-off. Zhu et al. (2024) find that repression can be perceived by the public as a positive signal of the state's capacity and commitment to maintaining social order and stability, thereby increasing support even in the absence of propaganda. Moreover, the perceived legitimacy of repression to uphold what citizens see as fair and just often outweighs demands for liberal rights or democratic processes (Tsai 2021), highlighting a popular foundation for authoritarian coercion. Similarly, in the realm of censorship and digital repression, public opinion research often reveals that the repressive nature of coercive institutions is often disguised, justified, or even popular (Esberg 2020; Xu, Kostka and Cao 2022; Yang 2024, 2025). This perspective compels us to rethink many core assumptions of classical theories regarding state repression and political order in autocracies.

5 Directions for Future Research

Decades of research on public opinion in autocracies have yielded valuable, though often inconclusive, insights. Moving forward, researchers should remain mindful of the persistent challenge

of preference falsification when designing and conducting studies in authoritarian contexts. Implicit measures, such as list experiments and endorsement experiments, should become standard practice. Yet direct questions remain indispensable: they are far more efficient than indirect questions both economically and statistically. They also capture key outcomes, such as the salience of public preferences, that implicit methods cannot, especially since implicit measures capture only aggregate opinions rather than individual ones. Thus, the most promising path lies in combining both approaches, using the efficiency and breadth of direct questions alongside the nuance of indirect measures to better understand when and why people falsify their preferences and what this reveals about authoritarian politics.

When measuring support for autocrats and authoritarian regimes, it is increasingly important to explore the heterogeneity of public opinion across different demographic and geographic groups within these regimes. Moving beyond national averages, researchers should examine how economic status, ethnicity, gender, regional identity, or urban–rural divides shape support for the regime. Such localized understandings can offer deeper insights into both the sources of authoritarian stability and the conditions that may lead to political fragility.

Yet, as this chapter highlights, a major underdeveloped area of research on autocracies is the study of authoritarian political institutions and dynamics, such as when and why regimes use repression, through the lens of public opinion. While it is clear that autocratic elites often care about public sentiment, it is less clear why some of these regimes care more than others and are more keen to invest resources in gauging the public's attitudes. Scholars could explore whether this variation is explained in part by different institutional configurations and the incentives they create for interacting with – and attempting to satisfy – the people. We also still know relatively little about how exactly public opinion influences internal power dynamics and policy outcomes in these regimes. Which autocratic elites tend to be more knowledgeable about public sentiment, and what are the downstream implications for their strategies in power struggles? Addressing these questions will be crucial for advancing our understanding of how public opinion shapes not only regime legitimacy but also elite competition and institutional design in autocracies.

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