

# Popular Support for Autocratic Regimes in Historical Perspective

May 26 & 27, 2026  
Toulouse

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School of  
Economics

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## Popular Support for Autocratic Regimes in Historical Perspective May 26–27, 2026

### ABSTRACTS BOOKLET



### CONFERENCE VENUE

Toulouse School of Economics (TSE)  
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Auditorium 3 – JJ Laffont (Ground Floor)

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*Session 1: Popular Regime Support: Nazi Germany*

**Jan Stuckatz**      ***Career Trade-Offs under Totalitarian Rule: Evidence from Nazi Germany***

***(with Selina Hofstetter, Victor Gay, and Mikkel Dack)***

What economic benefits did individuals derive from joining organizations of totalitarian regimes? We study this question in Nazi Germany by estimating the career returns to membership in the Nazi Party and related regime organizations. We construct a novel individual-level panel dataset from denazification questionnaires collected in the U.S. occupation zone between 1945 and 1949. These records provide retrospective information on party entry, organizational affiliations, occupations, income, education, and socio-demographic characteristics, allowing us to compare the trajectories of party members and non-members over time. Using a staggered difference-in-differences design that exploits variation in the timing of NSDAP entry, we estimate the effects of party membership on income, social mobility, and public-sector employment. We find that party membership was associated with a 20% increase in subsequent income, on average. The gains were especially large for early joiners, who entered before the Nazi consolidation of power in 1933 and experienced income increases of around 100%. Early members were also significantly more likely to obtain public-sector positions, suggesting that regime patronage rewarded risky early support. The paper contributes to debates on the material incentives sustaining participation in autocratic regimes.

**Sascha Riaz**      ***Regime Loyalty in Wartime Nazi Germany***

***(with Alexander De Juan, Felix Haass, and Julian Voß)***

Measuring regime support in closed autocracies is notoriously challenging due to preference falsification, state censorship, and pervasive propaganda. We introduce a novel behavioral measure of regime loyalty based on subtle expressions of allegiance in soldier obituaries published in Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1945. Our empirical analysis draws on a large-scale dataset of over one million scanned pages from roughly 160,000 newspaper issues across 260 unique local news outlets. Using Large Language Models for OCR and data labeling, we detect expressions of regime support, such as praise for Hitler, National Socialism, or the Fatherland, in more than 100,000 soldier obituaries. Our approach yields the first spatially and temporally granular measure of Nazi regime support during World War II. Our descriptive findings nuance the prevailing historical consensus: we find that regime loyalty began to erode immediately following the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, not after the Battle of Stalingrad. By contrast, militaristic rhetoric emphasizing soldiers' heroism persisted at high levels throughout the war.

**Ludwig Schulze**     ***Land and Loyalty: The Political Consequences of Land Reform in East Germany***

Prominent scholarship on authoritarian regime stability presupposes efficient coercive institutions to control citizens. However, as early regimes are often weak, how do autocrats establish power? Under conditions of weakened institutional capacities, this paper argues that autocrats can use redistributive policies to broaden their support base. Importantly, redistribution serves the purpose to effectively co-opt opposition groups. I study the early phase of East Germany's communist regime, focusing on the 1945 land reform that redistributed land from elites to small farmers. Leveraging the 100-hectare expropriation threshold, I show using a regression discontinuity, instrumental variable and difference-in-differences approach that the reform increased electoral support for the authoritarian Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the competitive 1946 elections. This study contributes to our understanding of authoritarian regime stability, underlining the role of redistribution to establish power in young regimes.

**Fabio Angiolillo**     ***Guilt By Association: Past State-Based Violence's Determinants for Fascist Organizational Strength***

What causes authoritarian ruling parties to have uneven organizational strength across the territory they govern? In this article, I argue that anti-democratic parties pursuing power through alliances with violent incumbents face a structural trap: short-term access to power comes bundled with the long-term liability of guilt by association. Citizens in areas exposed to past state-based violence extend their fear to allied parties, undermining the new ruling party's ability to penetrate those territories. I test this theory collecting 89,749 previously classified individual-level records on members of Italy's National Fascist Party (PNF) in Turin, matched to districts exposed to state-based violence under the Liberal Union governments. I implement distance analyses and spatial regression discontinuity designs consistently show that the PNF had significantly weaker organizational reach in areas previously exposed to pre-fascist state violence. Results hold across alternative specifications, placebo tests, and a national sample of Italian municipalities.

**Jan Hammelehle** *The Price of Consolidation: Austerity and the Nazi Alignment of German Business Leaders at the End of the Weimar Republic*

Why did segments of German business elites abandon parliamentary democracy in the early 1930s? We argue that austerity-driven economic distress altered the democratic commitment of German business elites during the dawn of the Republic. Additional politically inflicted economic hardships in a period of already acute crisis made realignment with anti-democratic forces more likely. We construct a new individual-level panel of corporate directors and supervisory-board members with geolocated residences and link these records with Nazi party membership files to identify anti-democratic alignment. We hypothesize that austerity-exposed business elites were more likely to join the Nazi party. Preliminary empiric results suggest that cumulative spending cuts drive party membership up and that absolute spending levels matter. Richer cities with higher output levels are less likely to see business elites becoming Nazi party members. We leverage the geographical cross-city variation in the intensity of fiscal consolidation during the austerity period of 1930–32, disaggregated into categories like housing, health, and education, as well as tax hikes. Regarding the mechanism, we also show that left-wing mobilization moderates right-wing realignment by triggering red-scare dynamics within the business elite. Results are contrasted with a sample from the general population. Overall, the study contributes to research on democratic breakdowns, the rise of anti-democratic parties, autocratic mobilisation, and elite commitment to democracy.

**Pau Vall-Prat** *Mayors as Autocratic Pawns*

*(with Albert Falcó-Gimeno and Jaume Magre-Pont)*

How do autocratic regimes consolidate control across their territory in the aftermath of democratic collapse? While existing research focuses on national-level repression and elite power-sharing, the subnational mechanisms of autocratic consolidation remain under-explored. This paper argues that local political appointments are a primary strategic tool for securing territorial control. In contexts of high political uncertainty, autocrats prioritize direct rule over power-sharing. Autocrats systematically install party loyalists in high-threat localities, as they expect them to be more effective in maintaining surveillance and neutralizing the opposition. We test this argument using original data on mayoral appointments in early Francoist Spain (1940–1956). By tracking the partisan identity and tenure of mayors across seven provinces, we analyze how the regime responded to internal assessments of local political threats. Using linear probability models and a difference-in-differences design, we show that areas classified by the regime as oppositional were more likely to receive loyalist appointees. This was especially the case when an informational update reflected a larger than expected oppositional threat. Our findings reveal that local appointments function as a critical and non-coercive instrument of autocratic consolidation, offering new insights into broader theories of vertical power-sharing and the subnational foundations in authoritarian governance.

## *Session 4: Elite Support: Fascist Italy and Kmer Canbodia*

### **Lorenzo Vicari**      ***Feather-Handed Fascists: Surveillance as a Signal of Bureaucratic Alignment***

***(with Pau Grau-Vilalta and Andrea Xamo)***

#### Panel 5: Belonging, Displacement, and Membership

Prominent scholarship on authoritarian regime stability presupposes efficient coercive institutions to control citizens. However, as early regimes are often weak, how do autocrats establish power? Under conditions of weakened institutional capacities, this paper argues that autocrats can use redistributive policies to broaden their support base. Importantly, redistribution serves the purpose to effectively co-opt opposition groups. I study the early phase of East Germany's communist regime, focusing on the 1945 land reform that redistributed land from elites to small farmers. Leveraging the 100-hectare expropriation threshold, I show using a regression discontinuity, instrumental variable and difference-in-differences approach that the reform increased electoral support for the authoritarian Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the competitive 1946 elections. This study contributes to our understanding of authoritarian regime stability, underlining the role of redistribution to establish power in young regimes.

### **Lucy Right**      ***Who Recruits for a Revolutionary Regime? Evidence from the Khmer Rouge Insurgency***

***(with Emily Myers)***

How did a small number of Khmer Rouge fighters scattered across the countryside in the late 1960s become, by 1975, an army of tens of thousands capable of toppling Lon Nol's U.S.-backed forces and unleashing a genocidal regime that killed a quarter of the Cambodian population? While the four years of the Khmer Rouge's brutal, revolutionary reign are well documented, we know comparatively little about how the movement was built and, particularly, to what extent existing governance structures were co-opted as a means of securing popular participation. Exploiting biographical data of over 6,000 Khmer Rouge cadre collected by the regime's intelligence agency, we first map temporal and geographic variation in the use of local government officials -- district, sub-district, and village chiefs -- to recruit new cadre prior to the revolutionary take over. Next, we consider the extent to which cadres' recruiter and demographic background matters for their eventual fate in the regime, correlating both personal and recruiter characteristics with the recruit's eventual position and location under Khmer Rouge rule. Lastly, we consider the long-term effects of the insurgency's co-optation of local government leaders on trust in local leaders in the current era. Altogether, this project seeks contributes new evidence to longstanding historical debates on how the Khmer Rouge came to power, while also shedding light on the causes and consequences of variation in rebel recruitment strategies for organizational hierarchies and post-conflict governance.

**Cristina Mac Gregor** *Political Heirs: Memory and the Persistence of Electoral Responses to Past Authoritarian Abuses*

This project focuses on the long-term electoral consequences of repression, and argues that repression by state actors can shape the electoral fortunes of candidates citizens associate with those former perpetrators. Existing work that studies the effects of repression on the intergenerational transmission of political preferences has found contrasting evidence. Further, the endeavor of observationally analyzing this relationship is challenged by the threat of endogeneity between the decision to repress and the ideological political alignments of the targeted communities. To address this, I leverage Peru's two-round presidential system to build a measure capturing the percentage-point difference between the right's predicted and actual vote share in the second round. I theorize that in places that experienced heightened repression under Alberto Fujimori's regime, the political right experienced electoral losses due to being represented by Keiko Fujimori, his daughter and the political heir to his regime. This work finds that memories of previous political experiences can influence electoral support for current candidates associated with prior authoritarian rulers: the right underperforms its first-round prediction in the runoff elections in districts where conflict was most intense and disproportionately carried out by the state.

**Isabelle DeSisto**      ***Family Repression and Political Mobilization Across Regime Types***

How does state repression shape political participation in the long run? Existing studies offer mixed findings, making it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions. I argue that the effects of repression depend on both mode of participation and regime type. I develop a two-channel framework in which repression increases political activism while also shaping beliefs about institutional responsiveness. These channels yield distinct predictions: repression should increase non-institutional participation across regimes, but its effects on voting and institutional trust should diverge between democracies and autocracies. I test these claims using survey data from nearly 30 post-communist countries. Individuals with a family history of repression are more likely to engage in contentious politics, like protest, regardless of regime type. By contrast, repression is associated with higher levels of voting and institutional trust in democracies but lower levels in autocracies. These findings help reconcile conflicting evidence on the long-term political consequences of repression.

**Magalí Serra Duran**      ***Voting under Repression: Individual-Level Turnout in Authoritarian Regimes***

***(with Pau Vall Prat)***

Do democratic experiences shape political behaviour under authoritarian rule? We argue that democratic socialisation leaves enduring imprints that influence participation even after a democratic collapse. The persistence of these legacies depends on individual and social resources that help citizens resist or reinterpret the coercive pressures typical of autocratic elections. We test this argument using a unique dataset combining 26,109 individual-level voting records with contextual information from the 1947 referendum held under Franco's dictatorship in Spain. We first examine the individual-level correlates of turnout, and then assess whether prior exposure to democratic elections during the Spanish Second Republic increased participation under authoritarianism. We complement this analysis with a smaller panel data sample tracing individual turnout behaviour in the 1930s democratic elections. The results show that prior democratic experience increases the likelihood of voting in an autocratic referendum, particularly among women. Yet, individuals with a strong democratic commitment are less likely to turn out under dictatorships. Finally, we show that coercive mechanisms shaped participation, but individual and social resources conditioned their effectiveness, highlighting the lasting influence of democratic legacies even under authoritarian rule.