COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Propaganda in Autocracies: Institutions, Information, and the Politics of Belief. By Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 526p. £26.99 cloth.
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This is an ambitious book on the use and impact of propaganda in authoritarian regimes. Previous research on propaganda has primarily been single-country studies. Carter and Carter instead constructed an impressive global dataset consisting of over eight million articles from state-run newspapers in 59 countries and in six major languages, and an elaborate set of text analyses, cross-country regression analyses, and survey experiments runs through the 500-plus page tome. While it is often difficult to tell what is really going on in data in cross-national regressions, the authors helpfully add various illustrative case studies in the book. The book's central argument is that regimes without meaningful electoral constraints tend to use over-the-top and absurd propaganda in order to signal their capacity for repression and domination; regimes with meaningful electoral constraints, on the other hand, use more neutral and credible propaganda in order to persuade. In addition to arguing this central thesis, the authors also tested a variety of interesting hypotheses regarding authoritarian newspapers' international coverage, the calendar of propaganda, and the effects of propaganda on protest.

The sheer scale of the analysis makes the book a clear and valuable contribution to the literature on political propaganda, particularly on the empirical front. The conceptual distinction between propaganda as *domination* and propaganda as *persuasion* is by now a relatively familiar one, albeit termed *hard* vs. *soft* propaganda in the existing literature. Relatedly, the *signaling theory* of (hard) propaganda has argued that authoritarian regimes can signal their capacity for social control and repression by imposing extravagant and heavy-handed propaganda on society; the goal is not to persuade citizens of the regime's merits but to deter dissent. This theory has previously been tested in the context of individual countries such as China, Syria, Vietnam, and Venezuela. By validating the theory with a global newspaper dataset and a series of survey experiments, Carter and Carter make an important contribution to our understanding of the nature and effects of authoritarian propaganda. One gem in the analysis is their use of Fox News's coverage of Republicans and Democrats in the United States as a comparison to illustrate the extent of coverage positivity in authoritarian state media, which is revealing and instructive (e.g., in unconstrained autocracies, state propaganda is about four times more pro-regime than Fox News is pro-Republican).

A key contribution of the book is highlighting the typical institutional features that go with different types of propaganda. At the same time, while the correlation between levels of institutional constraints and different types of propaganda seems clear, the causal language the book uses to describe their relationship can occasionally be confusing. Institutions are endogenous to political games and those in authoritarian regimes, in particular, reflect power relations between social actors. Thus, it may be the presence or lack of a ruler's dominating power that determines both the level of institutional constraints in the country *and* whether the media is completely subjugated as a tool for signaling that power. As the book appears to acknowledge in chapter 1, a regime without sufficiently dominating power has no choice but to respect some institutional constraints *and* sometimes concede bad news and policy failures in the media. This is what the signaling theory of hard/dominating propaganda would imply: It is the possession of sufficient power and repressive capacity that enables a "strong" ruler to signal their power with hard propaganda in a separating equilibrium.

The authors are well aware of the potential omission of such compound factors in their causal analysis of institutions and propaganda and offer case studies of Gabon in the 1990s and China in the last decade to rule them out. But that discussion focuses on leadership changes and socio-economic development, not power relationships within the countries. As the book makes clear, although Gabon in the 1990s did not experience leadership change, President Bongo's power relationship with the rest of society changed significantly during the period. The third wave of democratization ushered in student protests and labor strikes and, consequently, "the opposition [controlled] the streets" (p. 147). Combined with new pressures from France, Bongo was forced to make political concessions such as imposing presidential term limits and legalizing independent newspapers. The increasing electoral constraints and the softening of state media might be best understood as a common result of the changing power relationship, rather than one causing the other.

The book offers a perceptive analysis of authoritarian newspapers' coverage of international news, which has not been the focus of the existing literature. Since most people know (far) less about foreign countries than about their own countries, this potentially gives authoritarian media more scope to present extravagantly negative propaganda about foreign countries. Paradoxically, Carter and Carter point out that people's lack of a basis to judge the absurdity of propaganda about foreign/international news will make propaganda narratives in this area more similar across regime types than propaganda about domestic conditions, since the signaling power of hard/dominating propaganda lies in the fact that its absurdity is commonly known.

This astute observation is backed by some evidence from the data. There could be a complementary reason for the similarity of authoritarian regimes' foreign narratives. Since these regimes have fewer resources to cover foreign news than domestic news, they rely on foreign media and international wire services to draw materials, and there are plenty of negative coverage to draw from foreign free media, hence the similarities.

The authors also make an important observation about the tradeoff in media narratives about the outside world. On the one hand, regimes have an interest in reporting foreign governance failures and instability, and the literature on international benchmarking has shown that a negative comparison benefits domestic regimes. On the other hand, foreign instability that may involve the changing of government may also encourage protests at home. The book thus hypothesizes that authoritarian media will emphasize foreign governance failures and social decay but report less about elections and protests. Choosing what foreign news to cover is indeed a challenging question, and there is support for the authors' hypothesis in the cross-national data. To be sure, widespread protest and unrest are perhaps the best proof of foreign failures, so the tradeoff is delicate. There may be opportunities for further theorizing and analysis of this understudied topic.

Several later chapters of the book deal with the calendar or cycles of propaganda, another under-explored topic in the existing literature. The questions examined include when regimes are more likely to issue threats of repression via propaganda, spikes in propaganda during election seasons, and the use of propaganda vs. censorship around politically sensitive dates. Among the various interesting findings and observations, perhaps the most striking argument is that China uses propaganda about maintaining "social stability" in Xinjiang around the anniversaries of the Tiananmen Movement to deter future pro-democracy protest in Han-majority regions. While maintaining social stability is indeed a code word for social control—and even repression in many contexts—and the abovementioned argument is not implausible, more evidence might be needed to support this conclusion. This is partly because, as the authors point out, most (Han) Chinese citizens are unsympathetic to separatist movements in Xinjiang, so for them maintaining social stability in the region is something to be welcomed rather than feared. Empirically, only in half of the years since the 2009 Xinjiang ethnic conflicts was the rate of Xinjiang coverage in the *People's Daily* during the Tiananmen anniversary higher than on non-sensitive days (Figure 9.10). And in 2009, as the authors acknowledge, there was a spike in Xinjiang coverage during the Tiananmen anniversary, one month before the occurrence of the ethnic conflict that prompted the Chinese government's subsequent harsh anti-separatist policies. It appears that using narratives about Xinjiang to deter the majority Han Chinese population is not a consistent strategy, and there might be something else going on that contributes to some of the spikes.

The final substantive chapter of the book is on propaganda's effects on protest. Whereas previous studies on the topic are primarily survey experiments examining people's protest intentions, this chapter analyses cross-national observational data and shows that pro-regime propaganda is indeed negatively associated with the occurrences of protests at a nontrivial level. Testing propaganda's effects on real-world protests is a significant advance in the literature, even if the swiftness of the effect (the next day) might be a little surprising. Intriguingly, this chapter also argues that *Workers' Daily*'s propaganda narratives on the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements in western China's Tibet and Xinjiang regions would reduce protests in China's eastern provinces. The identification strategy here is refreshing: Outside Tibet and Xinjiang, most Chinese citizens are not particularly aware of the ethnic conflict anniversaries; therefore, national media narratives targeting western minority regions can be plausibly regarded as an exogenous treatment in the eastern regions. The results, however, raise a question because the *Worker's Daily* is a legacy Maoist-era newspaper and not widely read in China nowadays, even though some industrial enterprises and government offices are required to subscribe to it. As a piece of telling evidence, the newspaper's Weibo microblogging account usually receives very few and often zero comments and reposts. In contrast, the *People's Daily*'s Weibo posts routinely receive hundreds or thousands of comments and reposts. How can a low-impact newspaper's coverage achieve a significant effect on real-world protest behavior? Further research on this question might generate useful insights.

Overall, this is a rich book with impressive data and many astute observations. It contributes to the literature on propaganda both by validating previous findings about hard and soft propaganda using a global dataset, and by offering and testing a series of interesting hypotheses about several under-explored topics. While not every finding is conclusive, the book does raise important and intriguing questions that future research can follow up on. Scholars interested in how propaganda works as a hallmark of authoritarian rule will want to keep this book close at hand.

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