

## POLITICAL SCIENCE

**Authoritarian tightrope walk**

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Poor economic conditions in a country should cause voters to judge their leaders less favourably. In non-democratic societies, government propaganda and media manipulation could counter this effect. However, how poor economic performance affects voter perceptions in non-democratic societies is not well understood.

A study by Bryn Rosenfeld of the University of Southern California addresses this gap using fine-grained survey data from 67,000 adults across Russia, taken during the start of the global recession in 2008–2009. The surveys gauged respondents' perception of the national and regional economy, their intention to vote for the incumbent United Russia party and their belief in the objectivity of media coverage on the economy. By comparing the survey results to objective statistics on regional economic performance and a measure of the regional dominance of the leading party, Rosenfeld shows that (1) objective local economic changes affected voters' assessments of economic performance, (2) voters were more likely to attribute blame for local economic conditions to the incumbent party the more it dominated regional politics and (3) perceptions of a biased media led citizens to rely on non-official sources of economic information.

This work suggests that public opinion in non-democratic regimes may be less susceptible to manipulation than previously supposed. By increasing authoritarian policy, regimes risk shouldering greater blame for poor economic performance and by manipulating the media, they may create a less credulous public.

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