POLITICAL REPRESSION AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Abstract

The paper tests informational assumptions underlying strategic interaction and collective action models of government repression and dissent. Based on directly comparable data from 18 Central and East European countries collected between 1991 and 1996, this paper investigates whether citizens’ perceptions of human rights conditions in a country are systematically related to that country’s conditions of government repression. The analysis suggests that there is a significant relationship between negative evaluations of human rights conditions and levels of government repression. Moreover, it shows that political and economic conditions affect human rights evaluations, but that these relations do not lead to a weakening in the relationship between repressive conditions and public perceptions of human rights.

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Models of political action commonly assume that people have information and act on it. In particular, models based on choice-theoretic principles make implicit assumptions about how much and what kind of information people have. Because information is such a crucial ingredient in many models of political behavior, its mere assumption shapes everything from functional forms to the indicators researchers use to test hypotheses derived from them. Models of protest and rebellion, for example, often rely on the ability of dissidents to mobilize, which, in turn, usually is presented as a collective action problem (Lichbach, 1995a; Tilly, 1978). Optimizing in such environments requires information about costs, potential benefits, side payments and distributional issues, as well as ex ante subjective estimates of the probability of successfully achieving the desired outcome. This might be a tall order for political actors; yet it is equally challenging for social scientists to verify the empirical validity of these assumptions.

In this paper we seek to address a small piece of this very broad topic, namely the question of what the general public knows about the repressive policies of its government. This is important for two reasons: First, the body of research on political repression is moving toward strategic choice frameworks, and there is strong reason to believe that the theoretical and policy insights derived from them will be bountiful; second, the general literature on political mobilization assumes that people are informed about the costs of the status quo. One of these costs is the existence of intolerable repressive practices by the state. Repression is an attempt to stifle dissent, in part by generating information that anti-government activity will be costly. If this information is perfectly disseminated, people will expect to be violently repressed for their opposition; as a result, that will be less likely to act openly on their dissenting opinions. Information is crucial for this link between repression and dissent to exist.

Both classic and more recent work in the study of repression—particularly those that adopt a strategic interaction framework or focus on questions of collective action—are based on the notion that what the average citizen knows, or thinks, about state repression influences her behavior and subsequently
the behavior of the state. The crucial issue that goes to the heart of the validity of these premises is that for citizens to react to repression, they must know that it is occurring (what we call the “information assumption”). If this condition is not met, the validity of models that posit a strategic interaction between governments and (potential) dissenters who organize collectively may be called into question. Studying the role of information in the dissent-repression nexus allows us to examine the degree to which our ex post indicators of repression are consistent with ex ante public perceptions of the repressive policies of a state.

Aside from providing an empirical test of one of the fundamental assumptions underlying strategic theories of repression and collective dissent, our investigation contributes to and ties together other strands of research that heretofore have been distinct. First, it broadens the scope of the study of government repression by including the perceptions of average citizens. Second, studying public perceptions of human rights contributes to the literature on mass political attitudes in countries undergoing democratic transitions. And finally, the paper contributes to the broader class of strategic choice models that rely on the transmission of information, such as the role of audience costs in bargaining situations.

The next section develops propositions about the relationship between government practices of human rights and people’s perceptions of them. After describing the data and reviewing differences in human rights conditions and public perception across a host of countries, these propositions are tested with the help of multivariate regression models. We conclude by reviewing the evidence and spelling out avenues for future research.

**REPRESSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

Although we believe our tests to be more generally applicable, we focus on the study of political dissent and government response for three reasons: First, the collective action problem has been well articulated with regard to the rebel’s dilemma (Lichbach, 1995a); second, an empirical relationship has
been demonstrated between dissident and government behavior; and third, because tests of strategic models are based repression data that are generated post hoc, researchers have to assume that these data reflect ex ante information available to actors; thus, our tests could strengthen the validity of empirical tests of protest-rebellion models.

Overwhelmingly, studies of repression–commonly defined as “restrictions placed by governments on citizens’ political and civil liberties” (Davenport, 1999: 92)–concentrate on government behavior used to regulate activity within its territorial jurisdiction. At the heart of work in this domain is the question of what leads to repression. While much attention has been paid to democracy as a variable determining repressive government practices, other important variables used to explain repression have included political dissent, economic development, lagged repression, and dependency (cf. Davenport, 1999; Poe and Tate, 1994). The vast majority of these studies view human rights violations as outcomes in need of explanation.

Another strand of research has sought to examine what leads to dissent (Moore, 1998a). Such studies have been interested in repression as an independent variable and establishing the conditions under which repressive government action leads to violence, protest, or acquiescence (e.g., Lichbach, 1987; Rasler, 1996). Recent research has begun conceptualize the relationship between repressive government behavior and dissent as a two-way street (Davenport, 1997; Duvall and Stohl, 1988; Francisco, 1993, 1996; Gartner and Regan, 1996; Gurr and Moore, 1997; Lichbach, 1987, 1996; see also Tilly, 1978; Walter, 1969). Simply put, governments and potential dissenters are viewed as strategic actors who seek out optimal strategies for achieving their goals. It is in this strategic choice framework that the role of information becomes most critical to our understanding of repression and dissent.

Scholars examining repressive government action as strategic choice have found that elites who either are or believe that they are more threatened are more likely to repress their citizens (e.g., DeNardo, 1985; Franklin, 1997; Gartner and Regan, 1996; Khawaja, 1994; Lichbach, 1987). Political mobilization poses just such a threat, and to mobilize sufficiently to challenge the state the public must be aware of
adverse government policy. In other words, public perceptions matter, they matter in the aggregate, and they matter for elites who want to maintain power.

THE INFORMATION ASSUMPTION

Conceptualizing repression as a strategic choice implies that elites calculate the probability that citizens will detect repression and will take steps to prevent it. This assumes that people who live in repressive societies can recognize and interpret the government’s actions as repression. However, this fundamental assumption has yet to be documented empirically. For example, Moore (1998a; n.d.) develops a strategic optimization model linking state repression and dissident responses, which suggests that both actors respond to the behavior of the other. The more violent the dissent, the greater the costs imposed on the state; and the more threatened the state, the more likely it is to respond violently. Along similar lines, Lichbach (1995b, 1997) argues that there is a threshold of 5% participation of the population, above and below which states are subject to, or relatively immune from, revolution. Although not empirically verified, 5% of a population reflects a substantial number of people who presumably understand the dynamics of the state's behavior and, given this information, choose to participate in anti-state activities.

In a strategic environment the costs and benefits of an action are in part a function of the anticipated–and observed–behavior of the opponent. In specifying one actor's action, it is assumed that the actor has knowledge of the opponent's behavior. For example, when Moore (1998a: 24) discusses Lichbach's idea of the 5% rule, he states that ".... state elites either know this or have an intuitive sense of it ..." If violent domestic politics unfolds in a sequential process, then one actor must see the other's behavior if s/he is to respond to it. Clearly, one side's access to information about what the other side is doing is a linchpin in such models.

These models also assume that the potential dissenters and those they seek to mobilize have the
necessary information to act strategically in response to state actions. Thus, Moore's model assumes that the general public is aware of repressive state behavior and responds accordingly. And Lichbach (1996:115) argues that in strategic choice environments "rebels who see things similarly are more likely to rebel together." Rebels use cues—signals—to communicate intentions and to organize collective action. Taken together, these models affirm the critical importance of information about state behavior for understanding dissident responses.

Although strategic models posit that the general public knows the extent of repressive state policy, as far as we can tell nobody has attempted to observe whether and to what degree the general public actually is aware of the abuses perpetrated by the government. Certainly those who are the target of repressive policies would have full knowledge of the methods and extent of repression (Gurr, 1970). Thus, some might argue that only victims of repression and dissidents acting on their behalf pay attention to human rights conditions but that average people do not. Aside from being an open empirical question, we would argue that this is unlikely for theoretical reasons. After all, revolutions require the participation of more than a small group of activists willing to take risks (i.e., the 5% rule; see also DeNardo, 1986).

In our view, both the actions of dissidents and the perceptions that average citizens have of the country’s human rights situation are critical to mounting a challenge to the regime. Changing a government, particularly a non-democratic one, requires the mobilization of a significant portion of the population. People’s perceptions are important because they facilitate a context that might promote the rebel’s cause by influencing the likelihood that the regime will accommodate the challengers. Moreover, they matter because dissidents and protestors have to come from somewhere; that is, they are mobilized through information about government policies and abuses.

Although a number of research teams have developed indicators of state repression, they always are recorded from a point outside the strategic environment in question. Thus, it is not known whether these indicators accurately reflect the ex ante perceptions of those concerned. It may simply be the case that average citizens are not aware of repressive government actions. If they are not, models of repression
and the measures used to test them may face considerable conceptual and empirical challenges. One way to test the validity of these standards-based measures as indicators of the public's knowledge would be to match them with survey data that assess average citizens' perceptions of the extent of state-led repression.

The question of what average citizens know has more general application to models of political action. The study of repression and dissent is only one vehicle to examine the relationship between our data and ex ante information held by the principals who are the objects of our analyses. Many, if not most, strategic actor and collective action models are premised on rational choice assumptions about human behavior. Strategic choice frameworks are important for deterrence models (Huth, 1988; Huth and Russett, 1984; Lebow and Stein, 1989; Harvey, 1998), crisis bargaining (George and Smoke, 1974; Fearon, 1994), and theories of social movements (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996). The information assumption appears to lie at the core of many of these arguments. Because such models assume, rather than demonstrate, certain beliefs on the part of the actors, some have found it easy to criticize them for assuming too much sophistication or information when the models' predictions are not empirically confirmed (Green and Shapiro, 1994).

Moreover, models of mass political behavior also frequently assume that people have information about objective conditions as they exist in society. Probably the most prominent examples of research in this vein are economic voting studies. Researchers frequently substitute objective economic indicators for subjective ones in models of election outcomes or voting behavior. This assumes, however, that the objective state of the economy is translated into political behavior via citizens' perceptions without too much distortion. Contrary to this assumption, there is evidence to suggest that people's perceptions and actual economic conditions do not always match (Anderson and O'Connor). Whether the same is true for perceptions of repression is a question we examine below and one that helps us examine the relationship between objective conditions and political behavior in a new context.
The research on the strategic interaction between governments and dissidents requires that people’s perceptions of human rights conditions correspond with repressive government practices. Similarly, scholars who have systematically compared human rights practices across countries presume that citizens will recognize violations and perceive them as repression regardless of cultural background (Barsh, 1993). Thus, if public perceptions of human rights and actual human rights conditions match, this would support the assumptions made by scholars modeling repression as a strategic choice and the claim by human rights researchers that citizens perceive violations when they occur.

PROPOSITION 1: Citizens’ assessments of human rights conditions should be more positive, the less repressive conditions are in a country.

However, it is plausible that people do not react simply to the absolute level of repression in a country. Specifically, decision-theoretic frameworks frequently are based on the notion that one player will react to another player's move or a change in the status quo (Gartner and Siverson, 1996; Smith, 1996). If such changes—which can be conceptualized as a change in the state's decision to apply repressive instruments—are perceived by citizens, then people's perceptions should be systematically related to changes in repressive government actions. This also is eminently plausible from a purely behavioral perspective. In other words, a shared interpretation of a given set of events is a function not only of the events in questions, but also of the direction of change and other contextual conditions. It is well known that people frequently adjust their expectations to the world they are used to. That is, people get used to good or bad times and react to changes toward the better or the worse. Research on people's perceptions of economic conditions has found, for example, that people do not always react to the unemployment or inflation rates but to whether these indicators are increasing or decreasing. As a corollary, we therefore would hypothesize that citizens in two countries with similar levels of repression but that have experienced changes in different directions (one an improvement and one a deterioration) would have different probabilities of expressing negative views about their country's human rights situation.

PROPOSITION 2: Changes in levels of repression should significantly affect citizens’
perceptions of respect for human rights in a country. Citizens’ assessments of human rights conditions should be more negative as a country experiences changes toward higher levels of repression.

DATA AND MEASURES

In the past, efforts to systematically compare people's perceptions of human rights conditions have been frustrated by the unavailability of data measuring people's perceptions of human rights conditions in countries that were not fully developed democracies. One of the few data sources that permits such an undertaking are the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer surveys, which include data from eighteen countries, including nine of the emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and nine of the successor states of the Soviet Union (Armenia, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine). These surveys are the only currently available data that allow for a systematic and cross-national comparison of people's perceptions of a country's human rights situation across a wide range of countries.5

The public opinion surveys used in this study are based on random national samples of approximately 1,000 respondents in each country. We use the entire range of currently available data, which includes surveys taken between 1991 and 1996. Coordinated by the European Commission, the surveys were administered by national survey organizations. The measure gauging people’s evaluation of the human rights situation in the country is based on the question: “To what degree do you believe there is respect for individual human rights nowadays in (our country)? Do you feel there is a lot of respect some respect, not much respect, or no respect at all?”

Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses (% saying not much or no respect for human rights) across the countries included in the study, averaged over the six year period.6 The figures show considerable cross-national variation in public perceptions of human rights practices, ranging from Hungary, where negative assessments on average were 32.2 percent, to Russia, where almost 80 percent (79%) on average said that there was no respect for human rights (descriptive statistics can be found in
the Appendix). By and large, it appears that people in the states of the former Soviet Union have had significantly more negative perceptions of their country’s human rights conditions than those in Central European states. However, there are exceptions to this rule. Slovenia, for example, one of the most Western states among the group of countries investigated here, on average had negative ratings in excess of 50%, whereas Bulgaria, one of the countries with the most far-reaching Communist penetration during the Cold War period, only had a minority expressing negative views. In fact, Bulgaria’s numbers were quite similar to those of the Czech Republic.

(Figure 1 about here)

To examine the relationship between the measures of public perceptions of human rights and political reality in the countries investigated here requires that we match each survey with measures of government repression. That is, we are constrained by the fact that these surveys are the only data source we know of that asks people about human rights in a sufficiently large number of countries using an identical survey instrument. Ideally, measures of repression therefore would fulfill the following conditions: (1) it would be available for the 18 countries for which we have survey data; (2) it would be directly comparable across these states; (3) it would be available for each year for which there are survey data (1991-96); and (4) it would be a measure validated and frequently used by human rights researchers.

As Steven Poe and Neal Tate have pointed out, the “problem of measuring human rights-related concepts has received much attention in recent years. The problem of finding a consensual measure of any such concepts is likely to be an impossible one, due to inevitable disagreements regarding values and definitions” (Poe and Tate, 1994: 854). Acknowledging scholarly disagreements on this issue, we collected data on one of the most widely-used indicators of political repression in countries around the world and that fulfills the conditions outlined above: the Political Terror Scale (PTS). While other measures of human rights practices exist, they are not usually collected annually; or more importantly, they are not available for the countries for which we have survey data. Thus, the data used here are the only ones currently available for the kind of study undertaken here.7 8
The Political Terror Scale measures human rights violations, focusing on the integrity of the person (Cingranelli and Pasquarello, 1985; Henderson, 1991, 1993; Mitchell and McCormick, 1988). It scores countries on a scale from 1 to 5 (for coding rules, see the Appendix). Violations of personal integrity rights also have been referred to as state terrorism because they are coercive activities designed to induce compliance in others (cf. Gurr, 1986). The raw information for the PTS scale comes from the United States Department of State and Amnesty International Annual Reports on countries’ human rights practices. The scale has the advantage of wide applicability and comparison among countries and, within countries, for different time periods. These data have been used by scholars to examine the relationship between human rights violations and U.S. economic and military foreign aid policies; U.S. refugee admissions and asylum adjudications; and third world refugee flight (see, e.g., Carleton and Stohl, 1987; McCann and Gibney, 1996; Poe, 1990, 1991, 1992; Poe and Tate, 1994; Stohl, Carleton, and Johnson, 1984; Stohl and Carleton, 1985; Stohl, Carleton, Lopez, and Samuels, 1986). Countries that score high on the index are considered more repressive than those that score low. Figure 2 shows the country scores for the PTS scales averaged over the 1991-96 period.

(Figure 2 about here)

As with the public opinion data, the figure shows considerable cross-national variation in levels of repression, with Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine scoring lowest on perceptions of respect for human rights. In contrast, countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia record the lowest levels of repression. Similar to the perceptual data, it appears that core states of the former Soviet Union display systematically higher levels of repression than countries close to Western Europe.

ANALYSIS

To estimate the impact of repression on public perceptions in the 18 countries included in the study, we conducted a series of multivariate regression analyses of human rights evaluations that included the repression measures as independent variables, but that also controlled for alternative explanations of
human rights perceptions.

**Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable was calculated from responses to the question “To what degree do you believe there is respect for individual human rights nowadays in (our country)? Do you feel there is a lot of respect, some respect, not much respect, or no respect at all?” We utilized as our measure of public perceptions of the human rights situation the aggregate percentage of respondents per country and year who reported that they felt that there was "not much" or "no respect" at all for individual human rights in their country. The readings on this variable stretched from 20 percent in Hungary in 1991 to 85 percent in Russia in 1995.

**Independent Variables**

The primary independent variable was the repression measure described above. However, recognizing that a multitude of other factors may determine people's perceptions of their government's behavior, we controlled for the simultaneous effect of other potentially important variables. For example, it may be that people think human rights are being violated when there is more public opposition to the regime. Because people pay attention to agitators, levels of dissent may signal to average citizens that protest occurs for a reason. Specifically, we expected awareness of potential human rights problems to be higher and mass publics to express more concern regarding human rights when dissent was more prevalent. To measure dissent, we relied on data from the Minorities At Risk project (cf. Gurr, 1993; Gurr and Moore, 1997). This variable constitutes a combined index derived from one five point and one seven point variable: a protest scale and a scale of anti-regime rebellion; the combined index could range from 1 to 12, where 12 was the most severe form of dissent.¹⁰

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, investigations of support for abstract democratic principles and market reform in countries undergoing democratic transitions have become a small cottage industry (e.g., Evans and Whitefield, 1995; Gibson, 1996; Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger, 1997; Stokes, 1996; Waldron-
Moore, 1999), yielding a wealth of valuable insights. Yet, to date, researchers have not usually examined people’s opinions about government’s record on human rights even though people’s perceptions of repression should have a direct effect on the long-term viability of their governments.

Perhaps most prominently, research has shown that attitudes toward democracy and the new political system are related, that is, that those who have positive perceptions of economic conditions also tend to support democracy (Evans and Whitefield, 1995; Mishler and Rose, 1997; Stokes, 1996). We controlled for economic performance in each of the states by measuring levels of inflation and economic growth. Because unemployment data were not available for all countries in all years, we were unable to include these in our model. However, we also included a measure of development—the country’s annual GDP per capita. We expected that people had less negative human rights perceptions the better the national economy performed and the richer the country was. These data were taken from the United Nations’ Monthly Bulletin of Statistics.

Finally, we included a measure of social structure in our model of human rights perceptions. Specifically, we hypothesized that heterogeneous societies would have more negative public perceptions of human rights given that any one person is more likely to have experienced social conflict and thus may be more likely to think that rights are not systematically ensured and protected. These data were calculated based on data taken from the World Factbook and constitute the probability that any two people chosen at random will share the same ethnic background. Ranging from 0 to 1; a reading of 1 indicates complete ethnic homogeneity and a 0 indicates complete heterogeneity.11

Method

The analysis involves the estimation of multivariate models of citizens’ perceptions of human rights practices in Central and Eastern Europe. We only present the results for levels of negative assessments given that the positive perception measure produces virtually identical results to those presented here (the correlation between the two measures is -.98, p<.0001). Because we were primarily
interested in the independent effects of repression on public perceptions of human rights once we controlled for political and economic conditions in the country, we will focus on the repression variables but also expect that models including the controls would emerge more significantly in terms of total variance explained than models that only included repression measures.

Preliminary analyses using Ordinary Least Squares techniques and plots of the residuals revealed errors that were serially correlated and of unequal variance across countries; that is, we found that there was both heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation. There are several ways to account for the simultaneous presence of heteroscedastic and serially correlated errors (cf. Beck and Katz, 1995). We account for heteroscedasticity by reporting least squares estimates using White robust standard errors (Greene, 1993; White, 1978). White’s (1978) robust standard errors procedure corrects the OLS covariance matrix when the data are heteroscedastic. Thus, the usual set of OLS coefficients is reported, but with the revised, robust covariance matrix. To correct for serial correlation in the data, we utilize a procedure that applies the Cochrane-Orcutt algorithm. The Durbin Watson d statistic reported in the tables tests for the hypothesis that the errors are serially correlated. We present two models: one model includes only the repression variable, the other includes both the repression variable as well as the controls.

RESULTS

The Impact of Levels of Repression

The results of the multivariate analyses are shown in Table 1. They reveal that levels of repression were significantly related to negative human rights perceptions. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the models show that citizens in countries with higher levels of repression also had higher levels of negative assessments of human rights. Even when we controlled for the impact of other independent variables in the form of political and economic conditions, we found that the level of repression continued to be a highly significant predictor of public perceptions of human rights. While its substantive impact was slightly diminished when economic and political indicators were included, the repression variable
was able to achieve high levels of statistical significance in the multivariate model formulation.

According to these results, a one point difference on the Political Terror Scale translated into a significant difference in unfavorable human rights perceptions. For example, a country that had only moderate levels of repression with relatively few citizens directly affected (2 on the PTS scale) had 5-8 percent fewer citizens expressing negative views of their country's human rights than a country with a more extreme record of repression political opposition (scoring a 3 on the PTS scale) and 15-24 percent fewer than a country scoring even worse (5).

When we examined the results for the control variables, we found that not all of the coefficients achieved conventional levels of statistical significance. The only variable that significantly and consistently predicted positive human rights perceptions turned out to be the measure of internal political dissent. The results indicate that a one point shift on the political dissent index translated into roughly a 2 percent shift in unfavorable human rights perceptions. More generally, countries with significant levels of political dissent also had significantly higher levels of negative human rights assessments. This suggests that aside from actual levels of repression, public agitation against the regime informs and guides public perceptions of human rights.

The indicators of model-fit revealed that including the control variables increased the explained variance ($R^2$) in the dependent variable from 28 to 34 percent. That is, the model with the larger share of the variance explained was the one that included both the Political Terror Scale and the political and economic control variables. However, although the inclusion of the control variables helped improve the model’s overall fit, it did not remove the significant independent effects of the repression variable. In fact, the results suggest that actual repression explained almost five times as much of the variation in the dependent variable as the control variables taken together. Put differently, the results suggest that public perceptions of the human rights situation in the country is driven primarily by state repression and only secondarily by other factors such as political protest against the regime.

(Table 1 about here)
The Impact of Changes in Repression

When we examined the effects of changes in repression on public perceptions, we found that people in countries that became more repressive also exhibited higher levels of concern for their country's human rights situation. While the results were not as strong in a statistical or substantive sense as those we found for the level of repression, they were in the expected direction. Using one-tailed tests of statistical significance (instead of the two-tailed tests reported in the tables), this variable was statistically significant at the .07 level in Model 1 and at the .04 level in Model 2.

(Table 2 about here)

The control variables performed similarly to the analysis of repression levels reported above. Political dissent again exerted a statistically significant effect on human rights perceptions. In addition, inflation turned out to be associated with the percentage of people saying there was little or no respect for human rights. Thus, higher levels of inflation led to a greater percentage of citizens reporting negative perceptions of human rights. However, while the variable was statistically significant, its substantive impact was small.

Finally, measures of model fit underscored the earlier finding that changes in repression levels had only a small substantive impact on public perceptions of human rights in East-Central European states. When the change in repression variable was included by itself (Model 1), the $R^2$ was a minute .01; when all variables were included in the multivariate model formulation (Model 2), it rose to .16.

Taken together the analysis of levels or repression and changes in those levels supported Proposition 1 but failed to find strong statistical or substantive support for Proposition 2. Thus, public perceptions of human rights in Central and Eastern Europe reacted strongly to levels of repression and, to a lesser degree, levels of political dissent but not to changes in repression.

DISCUSSION

The literature on political repression has begun to focus on the role of choices made by
governments and opposition forces. These explanations for observed variation in the give and take in the struggles faced by state elites trying to maintain the status quo and the opposition trying to compel change, require ex ante information about what each side is doing to the other. Moore's model of this process, for example, links the future behavior of one side to the current behavior of the other, and vice versa. Moreover, as we discussed above, the participation of the masses requires knowledge of the conditions that they face (e.g., Gurr, 1970; Lichbach, 1996). Empirical tests of these types of strategic choice models requires some indication that the data used actually reflects ex ante information available to the participants. While the research community involved in the study of political repression is reasonably confident about the validity of its data, as measured by outside agencies (Poe and Tate, 1994), there has been no indication that these data are valid indicators of the ex ante conditions on the ground. We provide the first such test of the validity between people's perceptions of human rights conditions and the measures used by the policy and research communities. Our evidence suggests quite convincingly that the commonly used standards-based measures of political repression reflect the perceptions of the people in the communities to which these measures apply. This suggests to us that models of the interaction between government and opposition that adopt a strategic choice framework can be empirically tested with the extant data at hand, and that the research community can do so with considerably less worry about the validity of these measures as ex ante indicators of the general perceptions of the population.

Second, our results suggest that interpretations of human rights conditions are widely shared—at least across the 18 countries that were included in this study. Specifically, there is a significant and positive relationship between public perceptions and measures of a country’s level of repression. The analyses revealed that the indicator of government repression (the Political Terror Scale) was a more powerful determinant of human rights perceptions than any other indicator of political and economic conditions. Thus, people living in more repressive regimes also have more negative views of human rights practices in their country.
Moreover, evaluations of human rights conditions were significantly affected by the existence of political dissent in a country. We surmise from this that people gain information about human rights conditions from a number of different sources, including, but not limited to, political abuse perpetrated by the state. The perceptions of the public regarding the provision of human rights also appear to be a function of the amount of anti-government political activity that exists in a country. If people observe this activity, then they are more likely to develop negative attitudes about the behavior of the state. This demonstration effect thus has a significant influence on the ex ante information that antagonists in a strategic interaction environment hold.

Although there was no systematic support for the notion that public perceptions of human rights were driven by economic conditions or ethnic heterogeneity, the inclusion of such variables helped explain some of the variance in cross-national differences in human rights assessments. However, they do not wash out the significant effects of repression on people's perceptions of human rights conditions in the country.12

Our findings are particularly strong given that behavioral researchers also might have posited that such a strongly positive relationship between human rights practices and citizens perceptions of human rights in this group of countries would be unlikely, given that people in more repressive countries may not feel comfortable answering survey questions about human rights. Specifically, because countries that experience greater levels of repression do not always provide the conditions for expressing discontent with existing arrangements, conducting surveys in countries with lower levels of freedom may be problematic and associated with significant and systematic measurement error. Given that people living in countries where rights and liberties are not guaranteed may be more hesitant to evaluate the human rights situation negatively when asked in an opinion poll, the results obtained here are all the more remarkable.

While our data did not allow us to probe into the minds of citizens asked in these surveys, we were able to calculate whether people in more repressive regimes were less willing to express any opinion
at all about human rights. As it turned out, the reverse is true: on average about 4.5 percent of people living in countries with high levels of repression (we divided the sample of countries at the mean) expressed no opinion on the human rights question, whereas about 6.4 of people living in low repression countries did not express an opinion. When we correlated the “no opinion” category with levels of repression, we found a negative and marginally significant relationship (p<.05, two-tailed) between the percentage of people expressing no opinion and the repression measure. Thus, countries that had more repressive political regimes also had slightly higher percentages of people willing to give a public opinion on human rights. To the extent that these opinions are biased in a positive direction in repressive societies, the results we present here may actually be at the lower end of the true impact of repression on public perceptions. We would recommend that future research examine the extent to which surveys taken in transition countries encounter specific problems that may skew answers to sensitive political questions.

At this point, it is not entirely clear what the substantive strength of the repression coefficients mean with regard to political consequences that can be expected. At a basic level, they imply that people know when they are repressed, and that this repression-perception relationship is strong across a number of societies that vary widely in terms of economic and political conditions. Given that people can only respond to repression when they know they are repressed, the results imply that there are lower perceptual thresholds to dissent, the more repressive the government. As indicated above, a noticeable increase in repressive government activities translated into a 5 to 10 percent increase in the proportion of citizens who viewed the country's human rights situation in a negative light. While this may seem small as a proportion of the total, we would argue that this is a significant number of citizens were they to engage in activities that oppose the current regime. To obtain a more general picture of the substantive impact of repression on the percentage of citizens expressing a negative view of their country's human rights situation, Figure 3 plots the relationship between repression and public opinion while holding the other variables at their mean, minimum, and maximum, based on the results reported in Table 1, Model 2.

(Figure 3 about here)
The graph shows that the percentage of people saying that there is no respect for human rights in the country increases precipitously as the level of repression increases. Depending on whether we hold the other variables at their minimum, maximum, or mean, the percentage of people expressing a negative perception of the human rights condition starts around 45, 50, and 60 percent, respectively, and increases to about 65, 70, and 85 percent respectively under minimum and maximum conditions of repression. Thus, independent of the effects of the other variables, we can expect to see a net change of between 20 to 25 percent of the population saying that human rights are not respected, depending on the actual level of repression in the country.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The analyses reported in this study showed that human rights practices and people’s perceptions of them were systematically related. Moreover, the results indicate that this relationship was extremely robust, even when we controlled for competing explanations of public perceptions of human rights conditions in countries undergoing democratic transitions. Thus, we conclude that critical assumptions underlying strategic actor and collective action models of repression and dissent rest on a solid empirical foundation. Repression is accurately perceived by average citizens, and the interpretation of repression as violations of human rights is widely shared.

At this point, it may be worth noting what the analysis was and was not designed to show. This study sought to examine cross-national differences in the levels of people’s perceptions of their country’s human rights record and to what extent these aggregate figures, a variable designed to capture national differences, correspond with other national-level measures of repression, even when we controlled for alternative determinants of public perceptions of the country's human rights situation. Obviously, there could be regional influences on perceptions such that people in some regions experience more repression than people in other regions. Any analysis at the national level is not designed to capture this. This also means that the analysis was not an examination of political attitudes at the level of individuals. It is in
fact possible, if not likely, that the individual-level and aggregate-level determinants of attitudes toward human rights differ. For example, repressive government actions may be more likely to be perceived or perceived accurately when citizens have a motivation to seek out or interpret information about it. This motivation may come in the form of regime support or opposition or being part of a social group that is more likely to be repressed. In fact, the significant impact of the dissent variable in our models suggests that this is likely to be the case. We therefore would like to suggest that additional research is needed to examine to what extent aggregate and individual-level relationships match.

In addition to noting the limits of the level of analysis, we also point out that the analysis was not designed to examine how information is distributed in a society. This is an interesting question deserving of attention; we blackbox this mechanism here. We speculate, however, that it depends on the existence and behavior of such actors as social movement organizations, advocacy groups, the media, and governments themselves. After all, both governments and dissenters have an incentive to publicize information about repression. Future studies of human rights perceptions at the individual level should focus on these issues.

We also would like to propose that future analyses of human rights use attitudinal indicators of human rights when examining human rights as a dependent or independent variable. The study conducted by Booth and Richard in the Central American context (1996) is an important example of such a research strategy. The relationships documented here suggest that it would be important, first, to specify under what conditions people’s perceptions map onto political reality, and then to examine under what conditions they should have similar or dissimilar effects on behaviors and attitudes of interest. More generally, it also may be possible to combine these indicators to calibrate the expert-based measures or to have additional and more systematic information available to examine both the causes and consequences of repression.

Finally, the findings suggest that knowing what and how people feel about the treatment of their fellow citizens is an important part of a well developed and systematic understanding of human rights.
Specifically, the relationship between actual and perceived human rights practices may have important implications for democratic transition processes. Depending on the strength and direction of the relationship between political reality and citizen responses, elites may feel differentially compelled to respond to citizen demands for political change. Especially when popular perceptions and political reality do not match or if they match only under certain conditions, there may be little reason to expect significant improvements in democratic practices. Given that actual human rights practices significantly affect political participation and democratic norms, accurate citizen perceptions of human rights practices are likely to be an important mediating link between elites’ incentives and democratic reform in countries undergoing democratic transitions.
APPENDIX A. THE PURDUE POLITICAL TERROR SCALE CHECKLIST

1. Countries under a secure rule of law, people are not imprisoned for their views, and torture is rare or exceptional. Political murders are extraordinarily rare.

2. There is a limited amount of imprisonment for nonviolent political activity. However, few are affected, torture and beatings are exceptional. Political murder is rare.

3. There is extensive political imprisonment, or a recent history of such imprisonment. Execution or other political murders and brutality may be common. Unlimited detention, with or without trial, for political views is accepted.

4. The practices of Level 3 are expanded to larger numbers. Murders, disappearances, and torture are a common part of life. In spite of its generality, on this level violence affects primarily those who interest themselves in politics or ideas.

5. The violence of Level 4 has been extended to the whole population. The leaders of these societies place no limits on the means or thoroughness with which they pursue personal or ideological goals.
### APPENDIX B. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std.Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% reporting not much or no respect for human rights</td>
<td>54.01</td>
<td>16.91</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repression (Political Terror Scale)</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in repression</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political dissent</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic homogeneity</td>
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<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
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<td>1897.65</td>
<td>433.63</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic growth</td>
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<td>11.15</td>
<td>-41.80</td>
<td>10.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
<td>634.83</td>
<td>2306.95</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>22470.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTES

1. For the most part, this work examines why some countries respect human rights and others do not, and whether repressive government practices in one country affect another country’s decision to aid the repressive regime. The most prominent strands of this research have focused on the relationship between repression and foreign aid (Cingranelli and Pasquarello, 1985; McCormick and Mitchell, 1989; Poe, 1990; Scholtz, 1980; Stohl, Carleton, and Johnson, 1984), the effects of foreign direct investment on repression and human rights (Meyer, 1998; Rothgeb, 1991), and the more general impact of both the domestic and international political context on governments’ decisions to repress (Arat, 1991; Davenport, 1995, 1996; Donnelly, 1989; Gartner and Regan, 1996; see also Regan, 1995).

2. Gibson (1988, 1989) examined the relationships between elite and mass opinion and repressive public policy in one country—the United States—focusing on the repressive legislation adopted by the American states during the McCarthy era. He found that mass opinion was unrelated to the incidences of repression of the era. And Booth and Richard (1996) focused on comparing the independent effects of repression and public perceptions of human rights on political participation and system support in several Latin American states.

3. Even if citizens have accurate information about repressive government actions, they may not interpret it as a violation of human rights. Cultural theorists assert that values are culturally determined, and that prizing individual human rights is a hallmark of Western culture. This is not to say that only Western cultures value human rights, but that these values do not occupy a similar, primary place in all cultures. Further, scholars subscribing to the cultural perspective argue that perceptions of human rights infractions are relative; that is, what constitutes repression in one context is not necessarily seen as such in another. Because violations of rights are culturally framed, the cultural theorists’ perspective thus leads us to reason that it would be difficult to find evidence of a repression-perception link if people across countries do not share the same interpretation of human
rights (Barsh, 1993). That is, they may interpret the same information about government repression differently.

4. Such biases and inaccuracies frequently are expected to cancel each other out in the aggregate. As a result, researchers working with aggregate-level cross-national or time-series data typically have documented a consistent and reasonably close fit between objective reality and people's perceptions (Page and Shapiro, 1992).

5. Investigating public perceptions of human rights in this context is particularly appropriate given that these countries exhibit a mix of cultural orientations ranging from more collectivist in the former Soviet states to more individualist in some of the Central European countries (Bardi and Schwartz, 1996). Moreover, the post-Soviet and East-Central European states are transition countries that tend to exhibit a greater potential for repression (cf. Davenport, 1999). Thus, in the absence of having data for all countries around the world, this set of countries is appropriate for testing the hypotheses outlined below. Some scholars have reported difficulties with administering Western-style surveys in repressive societies (cf. Kwiatkowski, 1992). It is plausible that citizens in such societies are less willing to answer survey questions or answer them truthfully than in Western democracies where people are accustomed to giving a “public” opinion to anonymous interviewers. Thus, if a country's level of repression leads to significant validity and reliability problems regarding the survey instrument, the relationship between expressed opinions and repression is likely to be compromised.

6. Because positive and negative answers are the reverse of one another and correlate in excess of 0.9 (p<.0001), only the negative responses are analyzed below. None of the conclusions reached in the study are affected by the use of the negative responses only. Alternative results using the positive responses are available from the authors.

7. Events-based measures, which would identify who is being repressed, etc., are not available for a significant number of countries for which we also have public opinion data. Public opinion data on
human rights only exist for these countries; therefore our design dependent on the availability of the public opinion data. Obviously, Any standards-based measure of a country’s political conditions is open to the challenge that it may not reflect actual conditions with 100% accuracy. Specifically, these measures may be mediated by such factors as the number of human rights organizations in the country, the size of the Amnesty International chapter, or the media situation in the country. While acknowledging such measurement error, we have no reason to assume that it would be systematic.

8. The Political Terror Scale data used here were collected and made available by Mark P. Gibney (see, e.g., Gibney and Dalton, 1996). The only other data source that would permit the kind of analysis reported below is the civil liberties indicator constructed by Freedom House. This indicator focuses most prominently on freedoms of expression, assembly, religion, and organization, equality under the law, protection from political terror and from unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture (cf. Gastil, 1995). We found that the civil rights indicator was correlated with the PTS at .45 (p<.0001). However, it was not significantly related to human rights perceptions in a multivariate model formulation.

9. For this study we relied on the coding of the State Department reports because they had a significantly smaller number of missing cases.

10. Note that this variable does not measure dissent over human rights conditions, but simply general political dissent. If it were the former, the argument might tautological. Obviously, it is possible for a country to have dissent without high levels of human rights violations (and vice versa).

11. A higher score on the heterogeneity measure does not suggest that people in such a society do not predominantly live near or interact with people of their own ethnic background. It simply assumes that any one person of any one ethnic group is more likely to encounter someone of a different ethnic group than any one person of any one ethnic group in a more homogeneous society; that is, the argument we make here is probabilistic.

12. These results are consistent with a study conducted by Booth and Richard (1996), which compared
the independent effects of repression on political participation and system support in six Central American countries. Although Booth and Richard did not focus on the effects of repression on public perceptions of human rights, they reported a positive correlation between the two. Moreover, they found that the two have differential effects on political action. Specifically, they showed that actual repression in a country had stronger effects on citizens’ levels of political participation and their support for democracy than did aggregate measures of public perceptions of government repression. Consistent with our findings, this result implies that people’s perceptions of human rights conditions are only partly driven by actual repressive practices and that perceptions based on repression, in turn, only partially affect whether citizens oppose the regime.
REFERENCES


Figure 1

Country

Avg. % Reporting No Respect for Human Rights

Albania
Armenia
Belarus
Bulgaria
Czech Republic
Estonia
Georgia
Hungary
Kazakhstan
Latvia
Lithuania
Macedonia
Poland
Romania
Russia
Slovakia
Slovenia
Ukraine
Figure 2
Repression in East-Central Europe, 1991-96
Figure 3
The Effects of Repression on Perceptions of Human Rights

![Diagram showing the relationship between repression and average percentage reporting no respect for human rights. The graph includes average, minimum, and maximum lines, indicating an increasing trend with increasing repression.]
TABLE 1. EFFECTS OF LEVELS OF REPRESSION ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE, 1991-96 (Generalized Least Squares estimates)
(Dependent variable: % reporting not much or no respect for human rights)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of repression</td>
<td>8.01***</td>
<td>5.22**</td>
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<tr>
<td>(high=more repression)</td>
<td>(1.49)</td>
<td>(1.79)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political dissent</td>
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<td>1.70*</td>
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<td>(high=more dissent)</td>
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<td>(.72)</td>
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<td>Ethnic homogeneity</td>
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<td>(13.47)</td>
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<td>(high=more homogeneous)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
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<td>(.00)</td>
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<td>.00</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.10)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
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<td>GDP per capita</td>
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<td>(.00)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.23)</td>
<td>(12.09)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N          95            95
Adj. R²     .28           .34
SEE         14.46         13.84
Breusch-Pagan Chi-square (df) 1.08 (1) 6.93 (6)
Durbin Watson d 1.99     1.94
Rho         .65***       .69***

*: p < .05; **: p < .01; ***: p < .001 (two-tailed)
TABLE 2. EFFECTS OF CHANGES IN REPRESSION ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE, 1991-96 (Generalized Least Squares estimates)
(Dependent variable: % reporting not much or no respect for human rights)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Model 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Change in repression</td>
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<td>(high=more repression)</td>
<td>(1.23)</td>
<td>(1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political dissent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(high=more homogeneous)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic homogeneity</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(high=more homogeneous)</td>
<td>(14.19)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic growth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.00)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>57.63***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.88)</td>
<td>(12.32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 80
Adj. R^2 = .01
SEE = 16.15
Breusch-Pagan Chi-square (df) = 24 (1) 4.03 (6)
Durbin Watson d = 1.84 1.94
Rho = .64*** .67***

*: p < .05; **: p < .01; ***: p < .001 (two-tailed)