

Why do democratic and authoritarian regimes result in different types of public policies?

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After the end of the Cold War, the number of authoritarian regimes decreased as there was a general shift towards democracy around the world. Yet autocracies remain prevalent today despite the global consensus of democracy as the ideal. The different types of regimes might come to have a divergent impact on welfare and stability because of their contrasting dynamics, principles, and structures. This assignment will argue that the principal reason for why democratic and authoritarian regimes result in different types of public policies is because of differences in the division of powers and the level of political accountability embedded in the nature of each type of regime. Political accountability should be interpreted as the ability of citizens to hold rulers accountable for their actions. Initially, two arguments will be presented to establish how the political structures of each regime influence the direction of their public policies. The first argument revolves around the distinct difference in how power is distributed in democracies and autocracies which then gives rise to a second argument about claims to legitimacy. This relates back to political accountability and its impact on decision-making processes within both regimes. This leads to two arguments outlining the difference in incentives for democracies and autocracies to respond (or not respond) to public demands for certain policies when setting policy agendas. At last, the paper will refute an opposing argument about external influences.

First and foremost, the difference in types of public policies in authoritarian and democratic regimes can be ascribed to how power is distributed among those who possess it. In democracies, power is separated and balanced between the executive and legislative bodies, which entails a system of checks and balances. This requires the bodies to reach agreement on public policies because of their inherent conflict of interest (Persson, Roland, & Tabellini, 1997). Contrarily, power centralization is an apparent authoritarian tendency in which the supreme leader(s) of autocratic regimes has absolute control and decision-making power. As the number of significant policy actors is lower in autocracies, simultaneous with there being fewer institutional barriers such as public checks and balances, policy-making processes is likely to be more swift and efficient (Baumgartner, et al., 2017). Conversely, democracies might face the probability of slow and ineffective implementation of public policies because of their intuitional barriers to action resulting from their political structure (Stasavage, 2020). However, democracies might be more capable of gathering and responding to information regarding social needs and issues compared to authoritarian regimes, because of their civil society being free and more independent (Baumgartner, et al., 2017).

Claims to legitimacy vary greatly whether the regime is democratic or authoritarian. Democracies tend to obtain legitimacy through free and competitive electoral processes which corresponds to Max Weber's notion of rational-legal legitimacy (Orvis & Drogus, 2021). Legitimacy is thereby ensured in democracies due to the inherent political accountability where citizens have influence on public policies (Cassani, 2017). Authoritarian regimes tend to rely on alternative ways to secure legitimacy and control the masses. Successful and effective performances can potentially increase an autocrat's legitimacy and make up for the shortfall of other sources of legitimacy (Cassani, 2017). Autocracies can also create institutions that allow limited opposition and elections to ensure stability and legitimacy by providing space for some political participation. As legitimacy is closely connected to accountability and transparency, it relates back to how regimes implement and justify their policies to the electorate that namely seek to hold them accountable for their actions. In this context, transparency should be interpreted as "... *the full flow of information within a polity*" (Hollyer, Rosendorff, & Vreeland, 2014, p. 413). Authoritarian leaders have fewer independent sources of information as civil society and the media operate in a controlled and limited public sphere which contributes to a low level of political accountability. Additionally, they might have highly focused priorities as for policy that favors the regime, which could entail suppression of other policy-relevant information coming from society (Baumgartner, et al., 2017).

As political accountability is an important feature of democratic regimes, they will most likely have incentives to be more responsive to the needs and demands of the population. On the other hand, autocracies may be more incentivized to prioritize control and stability when setting their policy agenda. This could include policies about security and economy while democracies might direct focus towards social welfare, education, or public health. Brazil underwent democratization between 1974 and 1985 from an authoritarian military regime to a gradual transition towards democracy (Brown, 2022). During the military regime, federal spending allocated to education was low, and education policy was part of an economic development strategy to create a bureaucratic elite that could be co-opted to occupy positions in government agencies (Brown, 2022). The regime's policy agenda was accordingly based on an incentive to maximize power and strengthen their own position. This aligns with the tendency of autocracies to follow their own agenda in lieu of the public agenda (Boda, 2021). Yet as Brazil transitioned to a democracy, the incentive of the government to increase spending on education shifted. Education became part of a welfare programme to benefit a larger part of the population than just the elite (Brown, 2022).

Universally, political leaders seek to remain in office and maintain power. This can be attributed to why autocracies and democracies result in different types of public policies when focusing on the electoral periods in each regime. In democracies, elections are inevitable which can be argued to be another form of public checks and balances as politicians are held accountable for their policies when an electoral cycle comes to an end (Boda, 2021). As democratic decision-makers are subject to popular vote, they have strong incentives to address and resolve issues that are of particular interest to the public (Boda, 2021). This does not apply for authoritarian regimes as elections are not held in the same manner. Autocratic policy-makers can disregard public demands until the point in which social discontent possess a threat to the existence and stability of the regime (Baumgartner, et al., 2017). In the beginning of the 21st century, China abolished rural taxes and extended policies of healthcare and pensions to reduce burdens on farmers (Duckett & Wang, 2017). China had faced issues with protests in the past where burdens on farmers became a source of grievance that led to rebellions and collapse of dynasties (Duckett & Wang, 2017). This abolishment of rural taxes exemplifies that authoritarian regimes might provide social welfare to have a mobilizing effect, to prevent potential public dissatisfaction, and to claim legitimacy based on performance and policy outcomes (Cassani, 2017).

An opposing perspective to why democratic and authoritarian regimes result in different types of public policies could emphasize the impact that external influences can have on policies. In 2010, China imposed a trade sanction on imports on Norwegian salmon in consequence of the awarding of the Nobel Prize to a Chinese dissident in Norway (Garcia & Nguyen, 2022). However, this argument does not distinguish between causation and correlation as external influences might not be the sole and main driver of directing policies. China's shift in trade policy can also be explained by the nature of its authoritarian regime. Autocratic leaders fear being overthrown by which China cracks down hard on criticism of their rule and legitimacy as it exposes them to vulnerability. Autocrats therefore turn to co-optation and usage of propaganda to secure their power which is possible due to power centralization and lack of accountability. Contrarily, an Australian study sheds light on the effect of external influences on the decision-making process of a public health policy (Zardo, Collie, & Livingstone, 2014). These external influences comprised ministers, health providers, the media, and other interest groups (Zardo, Collie, & Livingstone, 2014) all of which operate within civil society in a free public sphere. These actors were able to impact the policy as democratic decision-makers are

enabled and incentivized to respond to public demands because of the inherent level of political accountability.

In conclusion, this assignment has argued that democratic and authoritarian regimes result in different types of public policies mainly because of the difference in the division of powers and level of political accountability embedded in the nature of each regime. The separation of powers in democracies and the centralization of power in authoritarian regimes explain their contrasting approaches of forming public policies. Consequently, some public policies may be implemented quicker in autocracies, but they might lack the checks and balances that scrutinizes processes of decision-making in democracies. Power maximization and ensuring stability are embedded principles of autocracies which can lead to incentives of favouring policies that benefit the regime. Yet if the power and rule of authoritarian leaders are threatened, they might be more prone to respond to societal demands about public policies despite their lower degree of political accountability. On the other hand, democracies are incentivized to acknowledge and respond to public interests to uphold legitimacy and sustain political accountability secured by their electoral processes. Further research that could broaden the perspective and knowledge on why the two regimes result in different types of public policies could be examining different forms of both democracies and autocracies. A discussion of whether democratic and authoritarian regimes have different types of public policies at all could also be incorporated.

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