**Political Repression Caused by Threat Perception**

Jamie Kazenstein, David Lowry, Amanda Sills

**Introduction**

Level of democracy and political repression are acknowledged as having a strong, negative correlation. The implication is that democratic states are less likely to use political repression. This implication, however, is inaccurate. Instead, democracies often do resort to political repression. On October 26th, 2001, in the wake of 9/11, the United States government initiated the Patriot Act, a piece of legislation which allowed the government to bypass the established rights of its citizens with the justification of national security. In 2003, elections in democratic Nigeria were accompanied by voting fraud and mass violence (*World Report 2010*: 142). According to *World Report 2010,* released by Human Rights Watch, the United States is the only government that sentences minors to life in prison without parole (582). Human Rights Watch estimates that some 2,574 U.S. citizens are currently serving life sentences without parole for crimes committed while under the age of 18 (*World Report 2010*: 583). This year, the French government endeavored to pass legislation to ban burqas from being worn, denying Muslim women the right to wear headscarves for political and religious expression (*World Report 2010*: 398). As these cases show, democracies are as capable of political repression as non-democracies. This begs the research question “*why do democracies use political repression?”*

As the majority of existing literature of political repression explores the negative correlation between democratic influence and political repression (e.g., Poe and Tate 1994; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999; Davenport and Armstrong 2004), it is the intention of this study to develop literature on the circumstances which result in human rights violations by a democratic state. Such contribution to the literature could provide insight into or explanation of outliers of the formerly noted, existing correlation. Such a contribution would not only strengthen the existing theories on the negative correlation between democracy and political repression by accounting for outliers, but also provide policy implications on alternative methods to political repression. With such potential contributions and implications, it becomes crucial, then, to attempt such a study.

In the cases of political repression by a democracy previously introduced, there exists a recurring characteristic. In each case, the action of political repression taken by the democratic state occurred after the perception of a threat by the state. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the question of why democracies use political repression by examining whether threat perception by the state is an indicator of political repression.

Testing this hypothesis required examining the significance of threat and the level of political repression occurring within a state following an external, trigger event. To accomplish this task, this study examined 120 conflicts occurring between 1976 and 2004, as provided by the International Crisis Behavior dataset and recorded the states’ level of political repression using the Political Terror Scale. The expected outcome of this study was to see a statistically significant, positive correlation between threat perception and political repression; however, after conducting the analysis, it was discovered that a statistically significant relationship was observed only in middle-income democracies. For middle-income democracies, external threat serves as a very strong indicator for political repression. No significant results were found for either low or high-income democracies.

**Theory**

Within the literature on political repression, three theories are most prominently used to explain why states commit political repression: type of political regime, economic conditions, and threat perception by the state. This study rejects the idea that either form of government or economic conditions have the dominant role in explaining the source of human rights violations. Instead, this study builds upon the idea that threat perception does take on this role.

Beer and Mitchell claim that “higher electoral competition” leads to “fewer human rights violations” (Beer and Mitchell 2004, 295). Fein, King, Regan and Henderson assert that both strongly authoritarian regimes and strongly democratic regimes are more likely to commit fewer human rights violations (Fein 1995; King 1998; Regan and Henderson 2002); Kirkpatrick, the former US Ambassador to the UN, asserts that totalitarian regimes are the most likely to commit human rights violations (Kirkpatrick 1979, 37-39). Each of these hypotheses has its merits and faults, but each treat human rights violations as a result of the interaction between the government and the people without considering lurking or intervening variables. Neither the government nor the people are indivisible black boxes, and there is considerable room for additional analysis of supplementary variables. In particular, it is possible that an antecedent variable has a significant effect on states’ dispositions towards committing human rights violations, regardless of the regime type of the state.

Economy-driven explanations of state repression also deny antecedent variation. Mitchell and McCormick give three possible economic hypotheses: there exists an inverse relationship between the wealth of a state and its human rights violations; modernizing states are more likely to have human rights violations; and states more heavily involved in trade with external capital interests are more likely to have human rights violations (1988, 465-470). Unfortunately, the theories behind these hypotheses do not account for the several divergent paths towards modernization and they are not empirically supported (1988, 470). Hypothesis based upon economic conditions theory were discredited by both Davenport (1995) and Poe, Tate, and Keith (1999). This is most likely due to the fact that they do not account for possible antecedent variables, such as perceived threat.

This study seeks to analyze a possible antecedent variable lacking from both approaches: external threat perception by the state. By focusing on threat perception, this study can better answer why states repress their citizens, regardless of their form of government. Davenport asserts that “regimes respond to domestic threats with political repression” to gain security (1995, 693). This study will add to the literature by focusing only on threats triggered, not domestically, but from external sources. Davenport’s restriction to domestic threats neglects the full effects of threats on the “presence of violence” and “deviation from culture norms,” yet he states that these affect the apparent legitimacy of state repression (1995, 693-670). In examining external triggers, this study removes a possible hidden variable. Thus, this study takes a slightly different approach to the analysis of threat perception than Davenport.

This study identifies three causal mechanisms of threat perception: when the highest-level decision makers in a state feel that the basic values of the state are under pressure, when there is a high probability of involvement in military hostilities, and when there is a short, finite amount of time for response (Brecher 1979, 446-464). Significant perceived threats to a state will cause the citizens of that state to be fearful. Manifestations of this fear can upset the standard operating procedures within the state and destabilize those in power. At the same time, the leaders within the state will respond to perceived threats by attempting to augment power and increase stability. In order to counter the possibility of rising instability, the political leaders of the state will use political repression, such as censorship and politically sanctioned violations of human rights, to quell manifestations. (Hoover and Kowalewski 1992).

Additionally, democracies place great importance on their principles and liberties. When the basic values of a democracy are threatened, citizens and policy makers of that democracy feel that their livelihoods are threatened. The citizens of that democracy would be willing to temporarily give up some of their liberties if they felt that this act would allow them to eventually regain their sense of security. For example, in the months after the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, the American people consented to the Patriot Act, effectively giving up part of their personal liberty to gain security. This effectively removes an incentive for the government to maintain the civil liberties of the people. In fact, as political leaders also seek to reestablish a sense of security, they are more willing to abridge the civil rights of the people. Thus the government is more likely to violate traditional human rights when it feels that its basic values are threatened.

Similarly, citizens are more willing to give up social freedoms and political leaders are more likely to sanction civil rights violations when there is an imminent military threat. The drive of the citizenry to have a sense of security and the goal of political leaders to reestablish that sense of security motivates violations of civil rights.

Finally, there is the mechanism arising from time-pressure. When policy-makers feel that there is only a short and finite amount of time to act, they are under greater pressure to act quickly and rashly. Rather than taking time to weigh the pros and cons of every possible path to find the best course of action, political leaders are more likely to take any acceptable course of action in order to act before the last moment. Meanwhile, if the citizenry is acutely aware of a short, finite amount of time to deal with a perceived threat, they not only put more pressure on their political leaders to act but are more willing to temporarily give up social liberties. The additional pressure to act and the willingness to take any acceptable course of action, combined with the willingness of the citizenry to provisionally accept human rights violations leads to an increased likelihood of state repression. Of course, this state repression serves the ultimate goal of increasing the sense of security and decreasing threat perception.

**Methodology**

The primary focus of this study is to analyze the relationship between external threat perception and severity of human rights violations in democracies. In particular, this study analyzes the claim that an increase in external threat perception within a democracy leads to an increase in the amount and degree of political repression in that democracy.

The primary alternative explanations for political repression are either related to the level of economic prosperity in the state or related to the form of the government of the state. As this study is focused entirely upon human rights infringements within democracies, the latter set of hypotheses is completely excluded. On the other hand, Mitchell and McCormick identify perhaps the most common economic argument in their assertion that the lower the wealth of a state, the greater the number of human rights violations in that state (1988, 465-470).

The best way to measure threat perception across states over time is to use the dyadic crisis as the unit of analysis, i.e. a crisis where one state is identified as the ‘threatening’ actor and the other is the ‘threatened’ actor. Each observation is of an international crisis between two states. This study defines “state perception of threat” as the level at which a state feels threatened by an existing conflict. This study employs Brecher’s Four Characteristics to determine the existence of crises:

1. A change in the external or internal environment of a state, which generates
2. A threat to basic values, with simultaneous or subsequent
3. High probability of involvement in military hostilities, and the awareness of
4. A finite time for their response to the external value threat.

(Brecher; 1977, 44)

Further, this study will continue to follow Brecher and Wilkenfeld’s scaled perception of threat. In particular, threat perception is classified into three ‘gravities’ of threat: low, medium, and high, just as Brecher and the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project have been distinguishing threats for years (Brecher and Wilkenfeld; 1997, 826). For example, a low gravity of threat indicates minor economic or diplomatic pressure while a high gravity of threat indicates imminent military action, international sanctions, and other severe and immediate threats.

By measuring threat in terms of dyadic crises, it is easier to identify which states are being threatened and which states are being threatening. With other methods of threat identification, one must worry about whether one state is truly being threatened, or whether that state has a tendency to get involved in extraterritorial affairs. Davenport and Armstrong, however, stress the importance of a clearly-defined, ordinal, multidimensional scale between states to measure political repression (2004, 540-545). The three-point ordinal scale on top of clear dyadic crises answers the need for clarity. In addition, the ICB Project has been collecting data on dyadic crises for decades, so an extraordinary amount of data is available.

To account for the wealth of different countries, this study uses average income data from the World Bank World Development Indicators, and separates into three categories: low, denoting less that $3,945 per capita income per year; medium, denoting between $3,946 and $12,915 per year; and high, denoting $12,916 or more per year. The World Bank collects data on many economic indicators, ultimately allowing them to have good estimates of Gross National Income. The GNI of each state is then divided by the population to arrive at the estimated income. It was noted that there was an approximately even distribution of incomes among the states in the ICB dyadic crisis data set, so no problems involving underrepresentation or overrepresentation are expected. Including this data will provide a source of control against the primary competing hypothesis for this study.

This study analyzes political repression, which presents the notoriously difficult task of measuring human rights and human rights violations. For the purposes of this study, political repression is defined as “a category of coercive activities on the part of the government designed to induce compliance in others” (Poe and Tate; 1994, 854-855). In particular, political repression includes state sanctioned murder, torture, forced disappearance, and imprisonment of persons for their political views. Following the tradition of Poe and Tate, ‘political repression’ is classified on a five-point ordinal measure:

1. signifies that people do not suffer imprisonment and torture and political murder are rare;
2. signifies that there is a limited amount of imprisonment, affecting only a few people, while torture and political murder are rare;
3. signifies that there is an extensive recent history of political imprisonment and both unlimited detention and execution might be common;
4. signifies a greater degree than 3 in each category;
5. signifies that a state places no limits on the means with which they pursue their ideological goals

(Davenport and Armstrong 2004, 544-545; and Stohl 1986, 592-606).

Data on the political repression of several states between the years 1976 to 2008 is available from the Political Terror Scale Database, which compiles reports and data from Amnesty International and the Department of Defense to measure and check for repression.

The Political Terror Scale is one of the databases on political repression most respected by political scientists. The use of two distinct indicators allows for a set of checks against bias. Considering that state repression is such a subjective concept, any reduction in bias provides a significant advantage over studies that do not control for bias. One of the most challenging aspects of measuring political repression is that it is difficult to collect data: politically repressed people are less likely to experience the freedom or capability of describing their political repression. Therefore potential alternatives, such as examining complaints of human rights violations, are simply not as applicable or dependable as the Political Terror Scale (Poe and Tate 2004, 852-856). Further, some criticize the Political Terror Scale for not fully incorporating all the rights from the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The weakness of such an approach would be that human rights are contentious even between democracies accepting of the Declaration of Human Rights. It is impractical to try to complete a study across several countries and to control for the different methods of measuring state repression, as well as the cultural norms on what constitutes state repression. Therefore the Political Terror Scale was chosen for this study.

In total, three ordinal measures are compared. As ordinal measurements do not adequately lend themselves to regression, a multivariate cross-tabulation is the best available method for analysis. In particular, this study conducts a cross-tabulation of the perceived gravity of threat during a crisis, layered by the economic background of the state, against the five-point ordinal political terror scale. This analysis includes all available data from the Political Terror Scale, International Crisis Behavior Project, and the World Bank. At the time of writing, there was sufficient data for the consideration of 30 democracies across 120 instants of crisis. There is an implied assumption within this system of measurement, which is that any change in political repression caused by external threat perception would occur very quickly after the perception of the threat. This is likely a valid assumption, as it is the nature of a crisis to demand immediate reaction. So the pressure from a crisis is felt strongly as soon as it is perceived. Further, public perception of a crisis is acute immediately after detection of a crisis due to intense initial media coverage; thus public pressure and stress is likely from the beginning of a crisis, thereby giving political incentive to reduce public discontent by raising the sense of security.

The analysis is expected to demonstrate a positive relationship between external threat perception and the amount of political repression within a state. At the least, if a relationship exists, it is expected to be positive. In the event of a negative relationship, either a spurious relationship was not considered or consideration of further variables is necessary.

**Results**

A multivariate cross-tabulation was used to analyze the relationship between political repression and external threat perception. Because both of the variables are ordinal, gamma is used to measure association. For low income countries, a moderate, positive relationship is observed; however, the model is not statistically significant. A moderate, negative relationship was found in the high income bracket; however, once again, the model did not have statistical significance. On the other hand, the middle income countries displayed a strong positive relationship that was indeed statistically significant at the 95% level.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Political**  **Repression** |
| **External Threat**  **Perception** | **Gamma** |
| Low Income | .333 |
| Middle Income | .521\* |
| High Income | -.357 |

**NOTE: \*Significant at .05**

Substantively, this analysis gives some interesting results. It is odd to see a negative relationship in the high income countries because it is assumed that countries with higher incomes would have more educated citizens who would be less willing to give up their freedoms without a just cause such as the perception of an external threat. Therefore, the occurrence of this negative relationship in the high income group, even though it is not statistically significant, would imply that there are other important variables not being considered and that a intervening variable might exist between political repression and external threat perception. The insignificance observed in the low income countries is not surprising because it is expected that citizens who earn low incomes will be less educated, and therefore less aware of whether their government is committing political repression. However, the actual analysis shows that there must be missing variables which have neither been accounted for nor controlled. The substantive meaning of the results of middle income countries follow the primary hypothesis of this study in that an increase in the perception of external threat leads to an increase in political oppression by the state. This result will indeed have implications for the future research and policymaking in the countries included in the middle income bracket.

**Implications**

Based on the above results, several implications for policymaking and further study should be noted. First, this study only controlled for one aspect of the economic conditions within a state. This leaves plenty of room for the control of additional conditions, such as unemployment or GDP, perhaps allowing for the identification of a relationship in the low and high-income democracies. The analysis shows that external threat perception is not a good indicator of political repression within all democracies when only the economic status of the crisis actor is controlled for. As mentioned before, the implications from this finding are that additional variables would need to be tested in order to find the best predictor. Additionally, at least for the countries in the low and high income brackets, it would be expected that policy pertaining to the stripping of citizens’ rights will not be based on the severity of an external threat. Some other variable must cause these democracies to repress their citizens. Within the realm of policymaking, middle income countries are more inclined to use perceived external threat as an accurate indicator for the appropriate depth of political repression that their citizens will allow.

Two additional things should be kept in mind for the possibility of expanding research on this topic. First, one thing that should be noted is that there is not a completely comprehensive scale that measures political repression. The Political Terror Scale and the CIRI scale allow for—and therefore, do not take into account—more severe forms of political repression that this study would like to include. Ergo, future research would benefit from an expansion of or a complete recreation of a new measure of political repression. Second, there are two other ways to expand the study of this topic: by looking at regime type or by looking at threat source. It would be interesting to compare the levels of repression between a democracy and a non-democracy to tell whether citizens’ opinion of government makes a difference in their willingness to concede to the denial of rights. Also, comparing the level of repression based on whether the threat source is internal and external would lead to more effective policymaking due to the fact that a country can recognize a trigger and take action to prevent such impending consequences as the repression of citizens’ rights.

**Conclusion**

The repression of human rights and civil liberties is seen all over the world. This will continue to be true until politicians and government officials can pinpoint the source of such repression. It is hoped that useful knowledge can be gained from this and other studies in order to make world leaders more aware of the tragedy of political repression and point them on a more acceptable path in the name of security.

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**APPENDIX I: DATA SUMMARY**

| **Case Processing Summary** | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Cases | | | | | |
| Valid | | Missing | | Total | |
| N | Percent | N | Percent | N | Percent |
| Gravity Ordinal \* POLITICAL TERROR SCALE, AMNESTY THEN DEPARTMENT \* Economix | 119 | 99.2% | 1 | .8% | 120 | 100.0% |

| **Gravity Ordinal \* POLITICAL TERROR SCALE, AMNESTY THEN DEPARTMENT \* Economix Crosstabulation** | | | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Count | | | | | | | | |
| Economix | | | POLITICAL TERROR SCALE, AMNESTY THEN DEPARTMENT | | | | | Total |
| lowest human insecurity | midlow human insecurity | mid human insecurity | midhigh human insecurity | high human insecurity |
| Low Income | Gravity Ordinal | Low | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 7 |
| Medium | 0 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 12 |
| High | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Total | | 1 | 7 | 5 | 9 | 3 | 25 |
| Medium Income | Gravity Ordinal | Low | 4 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 11 |
| Medium | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 11 |
| High | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | | 5 | 3 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 23 |
| High Income | Gravity Ordinal | Low | 2 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 10 |
| Medium | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 8 |
| High | 26 | 21 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 53 |
| Total | | 32 | 27 | 5 | 6 | 1 | 71 |

| **Chi-Square Tests** | | | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Economix | | | | Value | df | | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) | |
| Low Income | | Pearson Chi-Square | | 18.707a | 8 | | .017 | |
| Likelihood Ratio | | 22.457 | 8 | | .004 | |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | | 1.664 | 1 | | .197 | |
| N of Valid Cases | | 25 |  | |  | |
| Medium Income | | Pearson Chi-Square | | 10.594b | 8 | | .226 | |
| Likelihood Ratio | | 9.448 | 8 | | .306 | |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | | 4.018 | 1 | | .045 | |
| N of Valid Cases | | 23 |  | |  | |
| High Income | | Pearson Chi-Square | | 23.860c | 8 | | .002 | |
| Likelihood Ratio | | 18.225 | 8 | | .020 | |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | | 5.255 | 1 | | .022 | |
| N of Valid Cases | | 71 |  | |  | |
| a. 15 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .24. | | | | | | | | |
| b. 15 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expect | | | | | | | | |
| c. 13 cells (86.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .11. | | | | | | | | |
| **Symmetric Measures** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Economix | | | | | | Value | | Asymp. Std. Errora | | Approx. Tb | Approx. Sig. |
| Low Income | Ordinal by Ordinal | | Gamma | | | .333 | | .273 | | 1.205 | .228 |
| Spearman Correlation | | | .248 | | .239 | | 1.226 | .233c |
| Interval by Interval | | Pearson's R | | | .263 | | .215 | | 1.309 | .203c |
| N of Valid Cases | | | | | 25 | |  | |  |  |
| Medium Income | Ordinal by Ordinal | | Gamma | | | .521 | | .228 | | 2.028 | .043 |
| Spearman Correlation | | | .396 | | .186 | | 1.977 | .061c |
| Interval by Interval | | Pearson's R | | | .427 | | .170 | | 2.166 | .042c |
| N of Valid Cases | | | | | 23 | |  | |  |  |
| High Income | Ordinal by Ordinal | | Gamma | | | -.357 | | .179 | | -1.758 | .079 |
| Spearman Correlation | | | -.220 | | .120 | | -1.872 | .065c |
| Interval by Interval | | Pearson's R | | | -.274 | | .134 | | -2.366 | .021c |
| N of Valid Cases | | | | | 71 | |  | |  |  |
| a. Not assuming the null hypothesis. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| c. Based on normal approximation. | | | | | | | | | | | |