

Key terms + ideas

- authoritarian durability
- rentier states
- state-society imbalance
- Arab Spring
- Great Leap Forward
- Cultural Revolution
- revolutionary origins
- pessimists vs. optimists

Key questions

Q: According to Ross, what explanatory variable (also known as an independent variable) explain authoritarian durability? Why is it important?

A: For Ross, resource wealth, especially oil wealth, stabilize authoritarian regimes by providing a cushion against internal dissent and economic crisis. In particular under rentier states, this revenue allows for the opaque distribution of patronage, investment in security forces, and the maintenance of a welfare state without the need for taxation, which might otherwise trigger public demands for accountability and representation.

Q: What is Rosenfeld's key argument? In what ways does it contradict existing literature, namely modernization theory?

A: Contrary to seminal theories, Rosenfeld argues that the middle class is “often antithetical to democracy” (Rosenfeld 2021, p. 5) because its economic and social status within society depends on public employment by the authoritarian regime. She argues that existing theories, namely Lipset's hypothesis, depend on a growing middle class opposing existing networks of patronage but ignore the role the state plays in society through public enterprises and organizations. When the state plays a large role in the employing the middle class, Rosenfeld predicts that the growth of the middle class will not spell democratization.

Q: Why does economic growth support autocracies?

A: Economic growth benefits autocracies in a couple key ways. First, it reduces the immediate economic grievances of the public. Second, economic growth bolsters regime legitimacy and justifies lack of political reform. Third, the benefits of an economic boom are often distributed to strengthen patronage networks and ensures that no independent power bases can challenge the regime.

Q: Other than economic development and the growth of the middle class, what are the other explanations of authoritarian resilience from this week?

A: Other explanations of authoritarian resilience include: institutional design, external support, and the level of ideological control exerted by the central government. Compared to economic development-related explanations, these independent variables are more rooted in specific regional or country factors that may or may not travel to other contexts.

Week's readings

- Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?", pp.325-337; 356-357.
- Rosenfeld, *The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy*, pp. 1-27, 37-55.
- Read at least one of the sections (Middle East or China).

Review questions

Check your understanding of this week's material and key ideas with the following questions.

1. When, where, and why should we expect economic growth to support autocracy?
2. Per the authors this week, should we expect autocratic countries to follow the same paths towards democratization as those taken by countries in the 18th and 19th centuries? What might their path look like?
3. What factors do you think contribute most significantly to the resilience or fragility of autocracies today? In what ways has this changed over time?
4. Do the arguments discussed this week vindicate or poke holes in modernization theory? In what ways do they negate, confirm or amend modernization's theory's predictions for political development?
5. How would you characterize the types of arguments explaining authoritarian resilience? Which do you find most compelling?
6. Which case studies you read (on China or the Middle East) point to similar independent variables to explain autocracy? Which point to different or regionally-specific factors?

References

Rosenfeld, Bryn (2021). *The autocratic middle class: how state dependency reduces the demand for democracy*. eng. Princeton studies in political behavior. HOLLIS number: 99155289113903941. Princeton: University Press. ISBN: 978-0-691-20977-7.