Public Perception of Dissent and Repressive Response

Chelsea Estancona

Assistant Professor

University of South Carolina

Estancon@mailbox.sc.edu

Rebecca Cordell

Assistant Professor

University of Texas at Dallas

Rebecca.Cordell@utdallas.edu

Abstract

What factors drive variation in state responses to protesters and public support for a repressive response? The literature about repression and dissent suggests that given the costs of violence against civilians, states will reserve violent repression for particularly threatening groups. This assumes that states and their agents have sufficient information to assess threat and limit their response. However, many contentious political events (protests, riots, and repressive state action) occur in locations without a history of dissent or repression. When agents lack experience in assessing threat, from whence do they take their cues about how to handle dissent? We argue that in these situations, public perception of dissenters' characteristics becomes particularly informative for state agents. To assess public perception, we conduct a conjoint survey experiment using a nationally representative sample of 2,600 respondents in the U.S. about the goals, tactics, capacity, composition, and size of dissenting groups. In the experiment, we present survey participants with a series of profiles describing social unrest events composed of randomly generated features and ask them to rank and rate the two profiles according to their approval of police intervening in the incident with the use use of force. To assess agents' experience in assessing threat, we use information from ACLED about the location, protest history, key attributes of social unrest, and outcome of contentious events. This allows us to examine whether or not a contentious political event was the first of its kind in a particular location and whether agents lacking experience in assessing threat respond differently to those that have greater experience of handling protests. This research will inform scholars and policymakers about how public opinion drives variation in the government's repressive response of dissent and has broader implications for understanding and predicting outcomes of the changing global protest landscape.