

The Ambivalent Effect of Autocratization on Domestic Terrorism

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Abstract

This study asks if a decline of democratic regime attributes affects the volume of domestic terrorism. We argue that different forms of autocratization may stimulate or suppress terrorist activities. Democratic backsliding may dampen domestic terrorism, while autocratic consolidation may make autocracies more vulnerable to terrorism. This study empirically tests these assumptions on time-series cross-sectional data on domestic terrorism in 182 countries between 1970 and 2020 with a difference-in-differences design. We find that democratic backsliding reduces the amount of terrorism in the short to medium term. Autocratic consolidation increases the number of terrorist attacks in the short to medium term.

Supplementary Material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit: <https://doi.org/XXX>

Data Availability Statement

The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures and analyses in this research note are available at the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JWCLSB>

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1. Introduction

Autocratization is a well-documented development that has unfolded over the last years in most world regions, though the extent of the decline of democratic norms, institutions, and processes is debatable.¹ Autocratization has been affecting new democracies such as Brazil, Turkey, the Philippines, and Hungary; long-established democracies, from Austria to India to the US; as well as non-democracies such as Bangladesh, Egypt, and Nicaragua. Autocratization has potentially far-reaching implications of our understanding of the relationship between political regimes and political violence. For example, the Peace Report 2022² states that excessive security measures using political violence or directed against violent actors can lead to the erosion of democratic quality. The Varieties of Democracy Project's (V-Dem) data suggests that the "use of political violence by non-state actors is becoming more frequent in states undergoing autocratization"³. The attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, and the recent rise of right-extremist violence in the US are just two prominent examples many more.

In fact, data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the most commonly used measure of terrorist activity, shows a dramatic increase in the number of attacks since the 2000s, paralleling the global autocratization trend, with the number of attacks increasing and remaining high since the 2010s.⁴

Nonetheless, the growing number of studies in autocratization has not been accompanied by a similar growth in academic research about the political consequences of democratic setbacks, including the risk of political radicalization and terrorism. There is a rich and elaborate literature on the relationship between regime types and their levels of democratic quality, on the one hand, and the intensity of political violence, especially terrorism, on the other. Scholars have repeatedly analyzed if and how democratic institutions attract terrorism.⁵ Furthermore, an emerging literature in comparative politics has turned its attention to the question of how terrorism affects democratic decay.⁶ To our knowledge, however, there is only one recent study of the effects of autocratization on terrorism, and it is limited to the impact of democratic breakdown on the level of terrorist activities in re-democratized political regimes.⁷ There is also a small body of literature on types of autocratic regimes and terrorism. However, neither the terrorism literature nor autocratization studies have made a systematic attempt to investigate if the gradual change in the level of democratic qualities affects the frequency and intensity of terrorism.

This is exactly the unique contribution of our explorative study. First, we address the existing gap by asking *if a gradual decline of democratic regime attributes affects the volume of domestic terrorism*. By exploring how a change in key institutional requirements for democracy affects the level of domestic terrorism across different types of political regimes, this study departs from the predominant focus in terrorism studies on the relationship between terrorism and more static conceptions of democracy – either as a categorical regime type or as a regime level on a continuous scale. Second and crucially, we differentiate between episodes of autocratization that take place in democracies (*democratic backsliding*) and in non-democracies (*autocratic consolidation*).

Building on insights derived from previous research on terrorism and democracy, we combine two theoretical perspectives: First, the *grievance* perspective, which understands political radicalization and terrorism as instigated by the experiences of economically or politically disadvantaged groups (e.g., ethnic minorities), resulting in social movements and, at the extreme end, terrorist organizations.⁸

Second, the *opportunity* model, which emphasizes the role of power relations, political institutions, elites, and parties in shaping mobilization opportunities for terrorist actors.⁹

We argue that the two perspectives complement each other with regard to the implications of autocratization for terrorism. In this article, we argue that autocratization has different effects on terrorism depending on whether a democracy regresses or an autocracy consolidates. Our theory implies that autocratization starting in minimally democratic regimes previously characterized by the presence of civil liberties, media freedom, and political competition results in a political opportunity structure that is less permissive to, and hence decreases the opportunity for, terrorist actors to mobilize support and translate this support into violence. In contrast, the political opportunities in autocratic regimes are, by definition, already less permissive for terrorist mobilization; the effect of autocratic consolidation on opportunities for terrorism should therefore be negligible. Yet, the opportunity model cannot fully account for terrorism because it fails to address the motivation and willingness to use violence rather than alternatives.¹⁰ While autocratization generates grievances in both non-democracies and democracies, grievances are more common and more severe in autocracies, especially when they harden.¹¹ Accordingly, our theory predicts contrary effects of autocratization on domestic terrorism in democracies and in autocracies: When democracies become less democratic (democratic backsliding), the volume of terrorism in the short or medium run decreases. In contrast, when autocracies harder (*“autocratic consolidation”*), terrorism increases. We summarize our argument in three hypotheses concerning the effect of a decline of democratic regime attributes on the volume of domestic terrorism.

To test our assumptions, we compile a time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) dataset on 182 countries from 1970 to 2020. We analyze the TSCS data with a difference-in-differences analytical framework to tackle the problem that autocratizing countries may differ from countries that do not experience autocratization periods.

The cross-national statistical evidence lends support to the existence of the ambivalent effect described above. We find that autocratization per se does not affect the volume of domestic terrorism. This is consistent with the theoretical reasoning that grievance and opportunity considerations neutralize each other. Looking at the effects of autocratization processes starting in different regimes, this study finds that democratic backsliding decreases the frequency of terrorism by about 20 incidents three to five years after the democratic backsliding, while autocratic consolidation increases the number of terrorist attacks by approximately 10 to 14 incidents following the onset of autocratic consolidation up to two years afterwards. The main takeaway from these empirical correlations is that the effect of autocratization differs between regime types in terms of its direction and also in terms of its temporal effects.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. It starts with a review of the previous research about democracy and terrorism. This leads us to a discussion of our own theory. The next section presents the research design. This is followed by the empirical analysis. The final section summarizes the findings and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Previous Research

The literature on the implications of democracy for terrorism is extensive but divided over the question whether democracy heightens or lessens the incidence and fatality of terrorism. In addition, the current literature focuses on correlations between terrorism, on the one hand, and the regime type or the quality level of democratic institutions and practices, on the other, but overlooks the question if and how democratic decline in democracies and autocracies may affect terrorism.

Surveying the previous research, two theoretical perspectives prevail which have produced three general but conflicting empirical results.¹² A first, *opportunity-centered* literature argues that liberal democracies are more attractive targets for terrorists compared to more repressive regimes because democratic freedoms, executive constraints, institutional openness, electoral rules, and the rule of law increase the opportunity for domestic terrorism to mobilize, organize, and communicate.¹³ According to this view, democratic liberties such as the freedoms of movement and association as well as constraints on executive authority lower the costs of resorting to collective violence in democracies.¹⁴ At the same time, political competition and stronger media freedom induce actors to seek more visibility and “radical” techniques of political contention to magnify the publicity of terrorist attacks, accentuating their strategic impact.¹⁵

While this view was dominant until the late 1990s, a second, opposing view, has emerged since the early 2000s. It argues that as democracy is a “method of nonviolence”¹⁶ the mechanisms of democratic participation and political inclusion, and better protection of rights and freedoms, help to assuage *grievances* and undermine support for the use of violent means for political ends, which reduces the risk of terrorism.¹⁷ Political violence is a costly strategy that drains a group’s limited resources, causes group-member casualties, and may deter broader political costs. Therefore, discontented groups are unlikely to engage in terrorist activities if they can achieve their goals with alternative means.¹⁸ The openness of the democratic process and the democratic rules of nonviolent conflict resolution incentivize groups in democratic societies to pursue nonviolent alternatives rather than costly terrorist activities to further their interests.¹⁹ This increases the regime’s responsiveness to grievances and thus reduces the need to resort to violent conflict strategies. Autocratic regimes, in contrast, suppress legal means of political expression.

Furthermore, the greater respect for human rights in (liberal) democracies avoids the emergence of grievances from repression. Because functioning democracies have effective mechanisms of horizontal (rule of law), vertical (elections) and diagonal (civil society and free media) accountability, counterterrorism policies tend to be less arbitrary and repressive than in defective democracies or authoritarian regimes. In line with this, Findley and Young²⁰ find that countries adhering to higher qualities of rule of law and judicial independence suffer less from domestic terrorism than other countries. Likewise, Krueger and Maleckova²¹, Krueger and Laitin²², and Walsh and Piazza²³ argue that states with greater commitment to civil liberties and better human rights practices are attacked less than states that limit civil liberties with harsh counterterrorism measures.

Combining these perspectives on opportunities and grievances, a third view emerged in recent years which argues that the relationship between the level of democratic quality and terrorism in a country is nonlinear, taking the form of an *inverted U-shape* relationship.²⁴ Studies in this third strand of research argue that opportunity-focused arguments cannot fully account for terrorism because they fail to address

the motivation and willingness to use violence rather than alternative strategies.²⁵ At the same time, the “democracy advantage” in alleviating socioeconomic or political grievances is reserved to reasonably high-quality, liberal democracies alone. Therefore, “intermediate-level” regimes are more vulnerable to terrorist attacks than consolidated liberal democracies and closed autocracies alike.²⁶ This has been labeled the “more murder in the middle” hypothesis.²⁷ While low-quality democracies experience more terrorism than liberal democracies and non-democracies, hard autocracies breed less terrorism than authoritarian regimes with higher degrees of civil liberties and political freedoms. Highly democratic regimes entail a reduction of grievances, hard autocracies lack the opportunities for conflictive activities, and both therefore suffer less from terrorism than regimes at intermediate regime levels (so-called “anocracies”). These political systems, which cover both “electoral democracies” and “electoral autocracies”,²⁸ tolerate opposition parties and have multiparty legislatures. They are more prone to terrorism than closed autocracies because they provide better political opportunities for terrorism, but also lack the protection of human rights and civil liberties as well as accessible avenues for meaningful political participation and democratic inclusion which alleviate grievances in high-quality democracies.²⁹ The inverted U-shape relationship between regime types and terrorism is consistent with findings concerning other forms of political violence, notably civil wars,³⁰ but some scholars believe this result is likely a statistical artefact due to contaminated data.³¹

In sum, the theoretical arguments on the democracy-terrorism nexus are well developed but the actual findings remain inconclusive. Part of the explanation for this inconclusive state of research stems from the application of different time periods, divergent country samples, varied regime specifications (using dichotomous measures of democracy or continuous ones), different conceptualizations of terrorism (including international and transnational terrorism or examining only domestic terrorism), indicators for terrorist activity (number of attacks or fatalities), and included or omitted controls.³²

3. Theorizing the Differential Effects of Autocratization on Domestic Terrorism

The studies reviewed in the previous section probe the complex relationship between democracy and terrorism. What is missing, however, is a perspective on *dynamics*, in particular the effects of gradual democratic erosion on domestic terrorism. The limited set of recent studies on the autocratization-terrorism nexus focus either on the causal pathways that run from terrorism to democratic retrogression and authoritarian reversion³³ or on how a history of democratic breakdown affects terrorist attacks in re-democratized polities.³⁴ While Aziz Huq’s inductive study identifies different mechanisms of democratic decline in the context of terrorism threats (expansion of executive emergency powers, recalibration of the state’s repressive capabilities, and the rise of authoritarian populism)³⁵, statistical tests by Joshua Tschantret demonstrate that democratic breakdowns create grievances that contribute to higher levels of terrorism in political regimes that re-democratize, compared to authoritarian regimes and to democracies without a history of democratic breakdown.³⁶

The scant scholarly attention to the entanglement of autocratization and terrorism is surprising, given that autocratization has become crucial matter of concern in contemporary global politics. Democracy is in retreat worldwide, though the extent of decline remains somewhat a matter of dispute among

scholars of democratization and autocratization.³⁷ After the enormous expansion of democracy beginning in the early 1970s and gaining momentum in the 1990s, the number of political systems experiencing a reverse development, with substantial declines in their democratic quality, has steadily increased since the turn of the century.³⁸ Among many examples, the democratic quality in Hungary and Poland has deteriorated, and similar trends can be observed in Bangladesh and Brazil, Venezuela and Turkey, Russia and Nicaragua, in the Philippines and India as well as in the United States of America under Donald Trump.³⁹ As one can learn from these examples, one characteristic of global autocratization is that it affects both autocracies and democracies: In our sample, 32 autocratization episodes started in democracies, 55 in autocracies.

Furthermore, autocratization often takes the form of an incremental and subtle erosion of institutional predicates of democracy, without an actual slide into authoritarianism.⁴⁰ Even as executive aggrandizement, electoral manipulation, calibrated repression, pernicious polarization, and rancorous partisanship roil venerable democracies, the erosion of democratic institutions and processes does not produce new autocracies absent permissive material conditions. Therefore, studies of the potential link between the occurrence of terrorism within a polity to that polity's democratic decline need to adopt a conceptualization of autocratization that is broader than democratic breakdown.

Finally, the scant attention to the possibility that democratic recession is related to terrorism is also troubling because of the immediate policy relevance of a potential autocratization-terrorism nexus. The idea that terrorism is causally related to democratic recession and that democracy is an antidote to terrorism is frequently invoked in policy statements.⁴¹ However, existing studies suggest that repression in autocracies can actually deter terrorism, while political violence tends to increase when an authoritarian regime begins to liberalize – at least under certain conditions.⁴²

To fill this research gap, we adopt Lührmann and Lindberg's definition of autocratization as a "substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy".⁴³ Substantially, "autocratization" includes within its ambit the debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an *existing* democracy and that may or may not lead to the collapse of that democracy ("democratic backsliding"⁴⁴), on the one hand, but also the decline of democratic characteristics in autocracies, that is, a process of autocratic hardening and consolidation, on the other.⁴⁵

As has been shown in the previous section, the existing literature is divided and the empirical findings are inconclusive as to whether the linkage between democracy and terrorism is positive, negative, or nonlinear. If the relationship is linear, the freest and most liberal regimes are the least – or the most – vulnerable to terrorism. If the association is nonlinear, regimes that leave the "middle zone of more murder" should experience less terrorism once they become more – or less – free and democratic.

In this article, we contend that autocratization has differential effects on terrorism, depending on the type of the political regime (democracy or autocracy) and on the corresponding mode of autocratization (democratic backsliding or autocratic hardening). Decreasing levels of political rights and civil liberties close windows of opportunity for violent actors. Alternatively, autocratic consolidation, by increasing grievances among previously marginalized and now silenced groups, makes autocracies more

vulnerable to terrorism. Different forms of autocratization may thus stimulate or suppress terrorist activities.

We advance the idea that democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation are both relevant but affect the risk of domestic terrorism differently. Scholars of terrorism, civil war, and social movements focusing on *grievances* argue that objective conditions of relative deprivation lead to subjectively felt discontent, which in turn can motivate people to participate in extremist parties, violent movements, or terrorist groups.⁴⁶ Horizontal inequalities that result from the differential treatment of racial, religious, or ethnic groups – exacerbated by the socioeconomic effects of modernization and globalization – have been found to be conducive to radicalization, polarization, extremist mobilization, and terrorist violence.⁴⁷ Differential treatment is particularly likely in autocratic regimes, which frequently exclude groups from the political process. Moreover, autocracies rely more often on repression to compensate for a lack of legitimacy, which creates multiple sources of grievance. In contrast, liberal democracies tend to be more accommodative and less repressive. Although consolidated liberal democracies are not immune against democratic backsliding, as the US democracy exemplifies,⁴⁸ democratic backsliding is still mainly a phenomenon common to newer and more deficient democracies. Such political regimes are characterized by a “weak democracy syndrome”, comprising low levels of political institutionalization and high levels of polarization,⁴⁹ socioeconomic underdevelopment and crisis,⁵⁰ and a history of military praetorianism and internal conflict.⁵¹

Those countries with relatively weakly institutionalized democratic procedures that suffer from democratic backsliding and terrorism are, among others, Peru (1981-1991), Turkey (1988-2012), and India (1977-2018). That is, the democracies most likely to backslide are those that already exhibit strong grievances and low democratic qualities. Autocratization can create additional grievances, which might increase the motivation to join extremist groups or to support violent strategies. For example, existing studies document how government repression and regime coercion can radicalize political dissidents, increase terrorist recruitment, and undermine community support for the state.⁵² At the same time, however, democratic backsliding decreases the political opportunities for terrorism. Democratic backsliding is most closely aligned with the erosion of civil liberties and entails the concentration of power in the executive that goes hand in hand with an erosion of constraints on executive authority, akin to what Nancy Bermeo⁵³ called “executive aggrandizement”. Li⁵⁴ discovered that constraints on the executive branch increase the frequency of terrorist attacks in democracies, whereas fewer executive constraints dampen terrorism. Accordingly, we adopt the view that backsliding democracies are less prone to terrorism because the regressing democratic regime leaves fewer political opportunities to adopt violent reactions. Intuitively, democratic backsliding should also contribute to a decline in terrorist activities because it permits political leaders to implement more draconic counterterrorism policies. This is also in line with the findings that while democratization increases the risk of civil war, autocratization reduces it.⁵⁵ Therefore, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Democracies that experience democratic backsliding are more likely to see a decrease in domestic terrorism compared to similar democracies that do not experience autocratization.

As noted above, autocratization weakens democracies but consolidates autocracies. While democratic regression in democratic political regimes indicates a trend from (electoral) democracy towards authoritarianism, in autocracies it indicates a movement from less repressive towards more repressive autocracy. Regarding the linkage between autocratic consolidation and terrorism, we assume that autocratization in an authoritarian regime increases the susceptibility of that autocracy for terrorist attacks. The idea behind this assumption is the following: A decline of democratic quality in autocratic regimes occurs mostly in less coherent autocracies with at least some quantum of civil liberties and political rights (i.e., multiparty elections), semi-autonomous civil society, and some degree of media freedom, as exemplified by Burundi (2010-2015), Egypt (2013-2014), and Bangladesh (2006-2007). Autocratization in such political regimes implies the closure of constrained but nevertheless previously available opportunities for political participation, a further dismantling of already limited rule of law, and a potential disinhibition of the executive branch. The further erosion of remaining democratic qualities provides room for more draconian counterterrorism responses, which in turn can trigger a terrorist backlash as political dissidents lose their previous opportunities for other, nonviolent techniques of contentious politics.⁵⁶ The hardening of an autocratic order therefore can lead to backlash and increased terrorist activities, at least in the short term. This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Autocracies that experience autocratization are more likely to see an increase in domestic terrorism compared to similar autocracies that do not experience autocratic consolidation.

In line with our argument, the effect of autocratization on the volume of domestic terrorism depends on whether it takes place in a democracy (democratic backsliding) or in an autocracy (autocratic hardening). Following from this, we suggest that across all different regime types and various forms of autocratization, there is no statistically significant effect of autocratization on terrorism. Therefore, the third hypothesis to be tested is as follows:

H3: Across all different types of political regimes, autocratization has no significant effect on the level of domestic terrorism.

4. Research Design

To assess the impact of autocratization on domestic terrorism in a country, we compiled a time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) dataset on 182 countries from 1970 to 2020. The unit of analysis is the country-year. By using relatively novel matching methods with TSCS data,⁵⁷ we apply a difference-in-differences design and estimate the causal effect of autocratization on the volume of domestic terrorism. With these matching methods for TSCS data, we are able to deal with countries that receive the treatment (democratic backsliding or autocratic consolidation) multiple times and can also control for the timing of the treatment, which differs between the countries under study. We matched treated country-years, i.e. those country-years with an autocratization onset, with control country-years from other political systems in the same period that have an identical treatment history. For this matching procedure, we considered confounders that we present below. With this approach we can estimate both the short-term and the long-term average treatment effects of autocratization in democracies and autocracies on domestic

terrorism. However, due to limitations in the data generation process, especially concerning the data on terrorism, caution is required in the causal interpretation of our results.

4.1 Measuring Domestic Terrorism

Reviews of the state of the art present dozens of definitions of terrorism.⁵⁸ Recent debates have converged, however, around a mutually agreeable working definition of terrorism “as a politically motivated tactic employed by dissidents that involves the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role”.⁵⁹ To measure terrorism, we use the number of domestic terrorist attacks in a year. *Domestic terrorism* denotes the use or threat of violence by domestic non-state actors against targets within the same state. We limit our analysis to domestic terrorism because we thereby avoid conflating terrorism motivated by the change in democratic quality in other countries with domestic terrorism. Transnational terrorism includes attacks perpetrated by foreigners and cross-national terrorist groups that are motivated by grievances and opportunities in other polities.

We obtained data on terrorist activities from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which includes terrorist attacks perpetrated by non-state actors.⁶⁰ GTD is widely considered to be the standard for data on terrorist incidents in the quantitative study of terrorism. GTD inclusion requirements are consistent with the working definition of terrorism mentioned above. For an event to be included, there must be “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor”, and at least two of the following three conditions must be met: First, the act aims “at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal”. Second, the act is designed “to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims”. Third, the act occurs outside the parameters of “legitimate warfare” activities, “insofar as it targets non-combatants”.⁶¹

To test our hypotheses, we construct a measure of the *number of domestic terrorist attacks*. This variable is an aggregate measure of domestic attacks in a country. To differentiate between domestic terrorism and transnational terrorism, we use an additional variable from the GTD database⁶² that categorizes between those attacks which were logistically, ideologically, or geographically⁶³ transnational. We define domestic attacks as those that were domestic in all dimensions described above and we thus apply a high standard for domestic terrorism incidents. In addition, we exclude all terrorist events that are defined by the “Doubt Terrorism Proper” determination.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the ability to detect doubtful incidents from the database is only available from 1998 on. Those incidents include insurgency or guerilla warfare, mass murder, and criminal attacks. Furthermore, data for 1993 was lost by GTD due to an inauspicious data storage error. We interpolate the missing observations for 1993 by using spline interpolation (see Supplementary Appendix for more information on data handling), because the applied matching method requires, in the best case, a continuous time-series for each country.

A typical problem in terrorism studies is data reliability and validity. A number of studies speculate that the observed proclivity of terrorists to target democracies is due to reporting bias, because autocrats tend to systematically underreport terrorism in their domains.⁶⁵ GTD codes terrorist incidents by using a combination of automated workflow and human coding decisions based on open-source media reports

around the world. However, as shown by Dawkins,⁶⁶ newswire data in the context of volatile conflicts leads to significant biases in reporting deaths. Her argument may be also plausible for the context of terrorism. However, because GTD is the only available cross-national time-series database on terrorism enabling us to differentiate between domestic and transnational terrorism, we rely on this dataset. We make sure to interpret our findings with caution, however, due to the error-prone data generation process and potential biases in missing cases.

4.2 Treatment Variables

As mentioned before, we differentiate between two basic *modes of autocratization*: democratic backsliding that results in the decay or the breakdown of an existing democratic regime; and autocratic consolidation that starts in an existing autocracy. This permits us to analyze different modes of autocratization rather than only democratic breakdowns. Heuristically, we can think of autocratization in the following way: Autocratization is a process that constitutes a series of individual restrictions on political freedoms and civil liberties and/or of eliminations of executive constraints aimed at guaranteeing the horizontal accountability of the executive vis-à-vis the legislative and judicial branches of government. Such restrictions and eliminations might be initiated either by ruling elites, opposition politicians, the military, or other political actors. While instances of anti-incumbent coups, self-coups, and executive aggrandizement can arguably only be the consequence of the purposeful behavior of the initiators, the same may not hold for reductions in democratic quality brought about by large-scale political violence (i.e., civil wars), political polarization, or the intervention of international actors.

Data on the treatment variables comes from the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset.⁶⁷ While most existing studies typically model autocratization as a discrete outcome, we build on Lührmann and Lindberg's episodes approach that treats autocratization as a process.⁶⁸ We speak of episodes of autocratization to capture periods with a definitive start and end date during which substantial and sustained declines in the quality of democracy take place.⁶⁹ The start date of such an episode of autocratization is our treatment variable.

An autocratization episode is defined as a drop of 0.1 or more on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)'s Electoral Democracy Index (EDI).⁷⁰ The EDI measures the degree to which freedom of association and expression, clean elections, elected officials, and universal suffrage is achieved in a country. It captures the degree to which a country observes Robert Dahl's institutional guarantees of polyarchy.⁷¹ The EDI ranges on a continuous scale between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating a greater completion of electoral democratic principles. An autocratization episode starts with an annual decline on the EDI of 0.05 or more, followed by an overall decline of 0.1 throughout the episode. It ends if there is temporary stagnation on the EDI with no further decline of 0.05 in five consecutive years, if the EDI increases by 0.03 or greater in a given year, or if the EDI gradually increase by 0.1 over a five-year period. By using these coding rules to construct autocratization periods, we rely on the most reliable conceptualization of regime transformation with the best available fine-grained data on democracy.⁷² We count only those autocratization events for which we have valid data on the dependent variable and our control variables. In sum, we detected 87 *autocratization onsets* in the period between 1970 and 2020.⁷³

Our concept of democratic backsliding comprises what is otherwise called *democratic recession* and *democratic breakdown*. We measure *democratic recessions* as those country-years with an ongoing autocratization episode that started in democracies but did not lead to a democratic breakdown. *Democratic breakdown* is operationalized as an autocratization episode that led to a regime change from democracy to autocracy as defined in the ERT dataset. Between 1970 and 2020, there were 32 democratic breakdown and recession onsets according to our approach.

In contrast, *autocratic consolidations* are those country-years in which an autocratization episode as defined above started in an autocracy, based on Regimes of the World data. We find 55 autocratic consolidation onsets between 1970 and 2020. Thus, autocratic consolidation is the most common type of autocratization in our sample. Figure 1 shows the number of countries that were in an autocratization episode as defined above as well as the number of terrorist attacks globally across the years. It indicates that both phenomena have appeared to run in parallel in recent years.

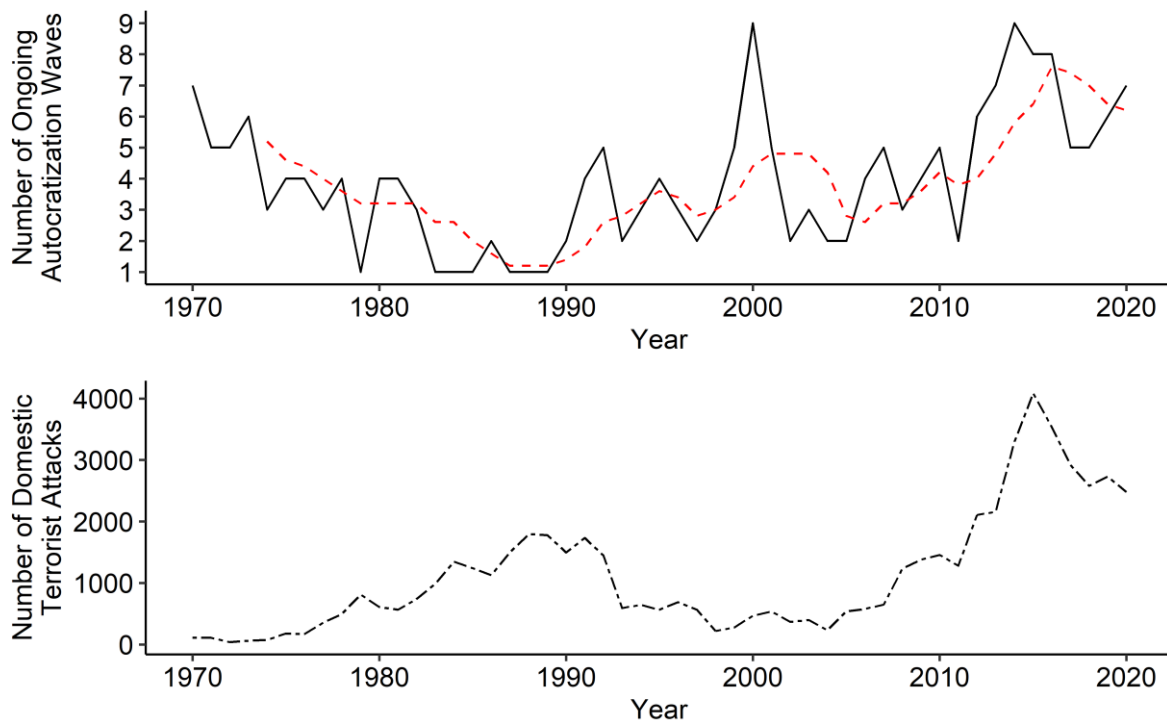


Figure 1: Number of autocratization episodes (plus five-year moving average in red) and terrorist attacks across years.

4.3 Confounders

We account for potentially confounding variables that have in previous studies been shown to affect terrorist incidence. We restrict the confounders to the most theoretically relevant subset that most likely confounds the relationship of interest.⁷⁴ First, using data by Fariss et al.,⁷⁵ we account for a country's level of economic development by including the natural log of gross domestic income per capita. We expect this to be a positive predictor of terrorism.⁷⁶

Second, previous research suggests that groups may use terrorism to provoke governments into repression and, therefore, alienate the population. Furthermore, in a weak state with little coercive, fiscal, or administrative capacities, minority groups may be able to engage in more conventional armed conflict with government forces to redress grievances.⁷⁷ Therefore, we account for the extent to which states are able to keep tabs on the population by using data on the military capacity of a state.⁷⁸ We employ a proxy that measures the size of a state's military personnel in each year between 1970 and 2012 per 100,000 population.⁷⁹ For the period between 2012 and 2020, we impute missing values by spline interpolation.

Third, previous research has shown that the exclusion of ethnic groups from political power and horizontal (inter-group) inequalities can motivate ethnic groups to resort to violence. Although these links are better established for civil wars or other forms of conventional conflict, Choi and Piazza⁸⁰ as well as Gleditsch and Polo⁸¹ find that the same logic could apply to ethno-nationalist terrorism. Moreover, ethnic discrimination and state capacity could interact to produce increases in domestic terrorism.⁸² We account for this line of reasoning by including the ratio of population in a country that is excluded from political power for racial, religious, or ethnic reasons. The variable capturing the ethnically excluded population is from the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset.⁸³ Missing values for the years 2018 and 2020 were calculated using a spline interpolation technique.

Fourth, countries that are more populous may experience more terrorism and other forms of violent conflict because they have higher policing costs,⁸⁴ greater cultural diversity,⁸⁵ and decreased state capacities and/or increased opportunity costs.⁸⁶ We therefore account for population size using the common logarithm with data from Fariss et al.'s latent population estimates curated in the V-Dem dataset.⁸⁷

Fifth, countries that are geographically more extensive may also experience more terrorism and other forms of violent conflict because they have higher policing costs and more retreat areas for terrorist and other violent groups.⁸⁸ We therefore account for land area in square kilometers using the common logarithm with data from Schvitz et al.⁸⁹

Sixth, as previously mentioned, democracy and terrorism are (causally) associated, though the empirical evidence remains contradictory. We account for the different arguments by including a "democratic stock" measure that assesses the accumulated experience of democratic rule within a polity. Democratic stock thereby provides additional information on a country's democratic history that is not captured by its present electoral democracy level but that exerts continued influence on contemporary events, rather than having only contemporaneous effects.⁹⁰ The democratic stock variable is estimated from V-Dem's EDI with a five percent annual depreciation rate. More information on the construction of the variable is presented in Appendix A2. Table A1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the treatment, the outcome, and the confounding variables.

4.4 Difference-in-Differences Estimator

Our aim is to estimate the causal effect of autocratization on terrorism in an observational research design. For this aim, the "comparison of treated and control observations who share similar observed

characteristics⁹¹ is an effective strategy. We choose newly introduced matching methods for TSCS data, because popular two-way fixed effects regression models come at the expense of dynamic causal relationships⁹² that are highly likely in the effect of autocratization on terrorism. Two-way fixed effects models assume that past treatments (e.g., autocratization) do not directly influence current outcomes (e.g., terrorist attacks) as well as that past outcomes (here: terrorist attacks) do not influence current treatments.⁹³ This assumption seems implausible for the relationship between autocratization and terrorist attacks, as shown in Figure 2.

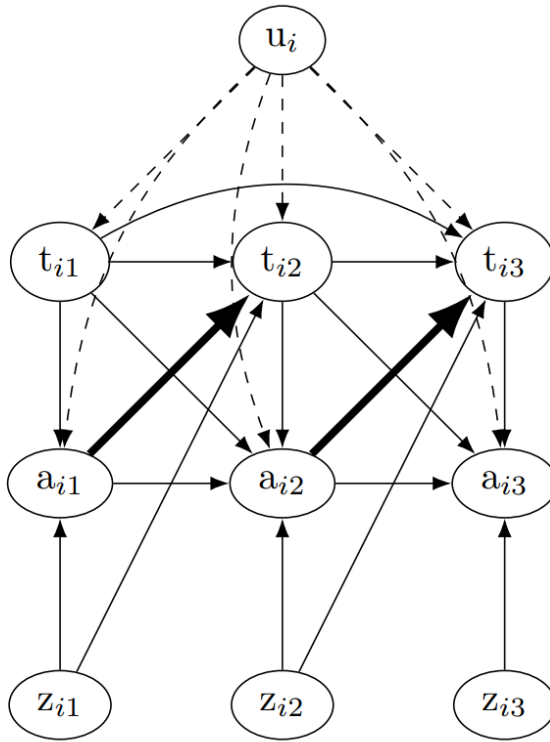


Figure 2: Causal graph of autocratization and Terrorism

Note: The causal graph depicting a hypothetical data-generating-process whereby autocratization a_{it} exerts a causal effect on terrorism t_{it+1} , with z_{it} being an observed time- and country-varying confounder. Bold arrows indicate the hypothesized causal effect of autocratization on terrorism, while arrows indicate assumed causal effects. Dashed arrows indicate unobserved effects of u_i as an unobserved time-invariant confounder.

Moreover, two-way fixed effects regression models assume that time-specific and unit-specific unobserved confounders are adjusted simultaneously.⁹⁴ This logic assumes linear additive effects that are uncommon in TSCS data. In contrast to the strict modelling assumptions of two-way fixed effects models, the proposed matching method uses a more flexible strategy for causal inference.⁹⁵ However, although we estimate both short-term and medium-term average treatment effects of autocratization on terrorist attacks and thereby provide a rigorous empirical test of our theory, we test for additional empirical specifications. In a robustness test, we provide evidence that our results are not model dependent. In the main models we use propensity score weighting because it provides the best covariate balance among all matching and weighting methods (see Supplementary Appendix Figure G1 – G3), while we test for alternative matching and weighting procedures in the Supplementary Appendix.

As shown in Figure 2, our treatment variable a_{it} takes the value of 1 if country i is in an autocratization episode in year t . For each unit $i = 1, 2, \dots, N$ at time $t = 1, 2, \dots, T$, we observe the outcome variable t_{it} , the binary treatment variable a_{it} , and a vector of K time-varying covariates Z_{it} . Figure 2 indicates that we assume that within each time-period the covariates Z_{it} are realized before the administration of the treatment a_{it} , which in turn occurs before the outcome variable t_{it} is realized. We calculate the average treatment effect of autocratization onset as defined:

$$\delta(F, L) = E \left\{ t_{i,t+F} \left(a_{it} = 1, a_{i,t-1} = 0, \{a_{i,t-l}\}_{l=2}^L \right) - t_{i,t+F} \left(a_{it} = 0, a_{i,t-1} = 0, \{a_{i,t-l}\}_{l=2}^L \right) \mid a_{it} = 1, a_{i,t-1} = 0 \right\} \quad (1)$$

, where the treated country-years are those observations that experience the treatment, i.e., $a_{i,t-1} = 0$ and $a_{i,t} = 1$.

In this equation,

$$t_{i,t+F} \left(a_{it} = 1, a_{i,t-1} = 0, \{a_{i,t-l}\}_{l=2}^L \right) \quad (2)$$

is the potential outcome under the treatment, whereas

$$t_{i,t+F} \left(a_{it} = 0, a_{i,t-1} = 0, \{a_{i,t-l}\}_{l=2}^L \right) \quad (3)$$

is the potential outcome without the treatment. In this specification, we set $\delta(F, L)$ to $\delta(5, 2)$, which represents the average causal effect of autocratization on the terrorism incidence five years after the treatment while assuming that the potential outcome only depends on the treatment history up to two years back.⁹⁶ In addition, a few assumptions must be made: 1) We assume the absence of any spillover effects between countries i ; 2) we assume future treatment reversal in a sense that autocratization ends and the country-year goes back to the control condition.⁹⁷ In addition, we do not control for the treatment history of the number of terrorist attacks because these numbers are highly volatile. Instead, we control for the treatment history up to two years back by using the moving five-year averages of terrorist attacks. This measure is less volatile and therefore presents a better proxy for a country's terrorist history. Overall, in contrast to adding confounders as covariates, matching is an intuitive tool to deal with selection into treatment⁹⁸ and is less prone to modelling decisions but relies on the parallel trend assumption in the outcome variable as well on the covariate trajectory.

5. Results

To differentiate between the effects of autocratization on domestic terrorist attacks in different types of political regimes and to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 we distinguish between *democratic backsliding* and *autocratic consolidation*. Our sample of democratic backsliders comprises 32 onsets of autocratization

that occurs in democratic regimes (6 onsets of democratic recession and 26 onset of democratic breakdown).

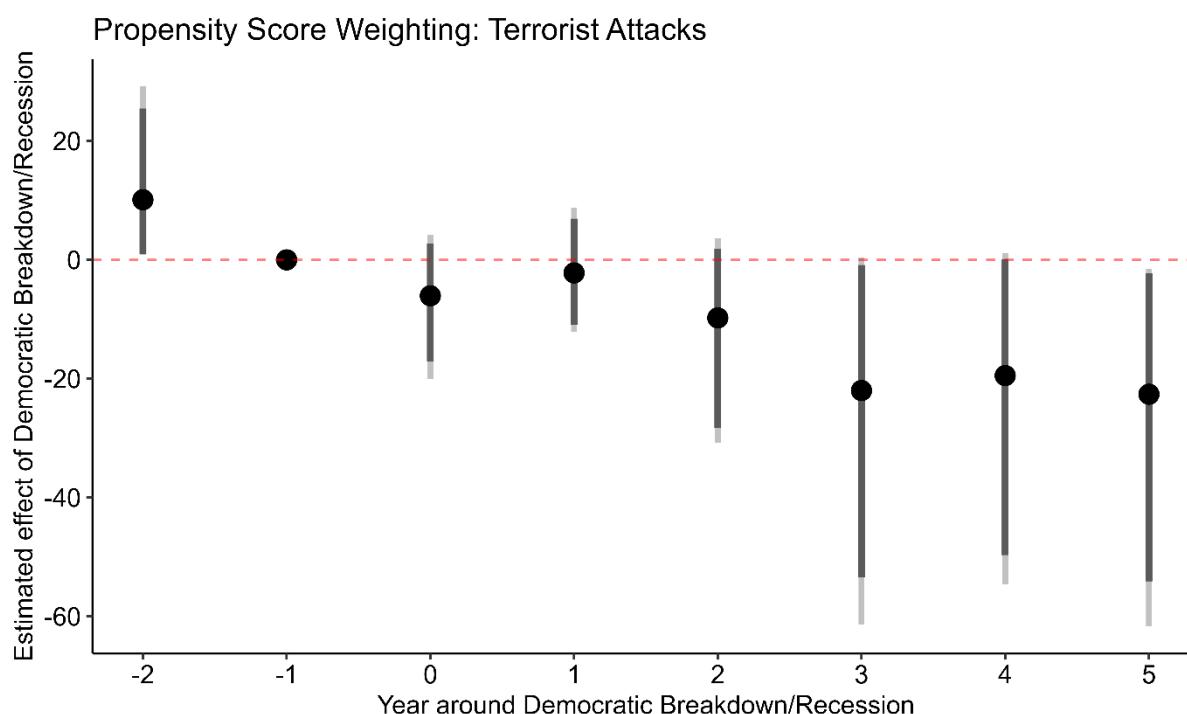


Figure 3: Estimated average effects of democratic backsliding on domestic terrorism

The estimates are based on the matching method that adjusts for the treatment and covariate histories during the two years prior to the democratic breakdown/ recession, i.e., $L = 2$. The estimates for the average effects of democratic breakdown/ recession are shown for the period of five years after the treatment, i.e., $F = 0, 1, \dots, 4$ with 90% and 95% bootstrap confidence intervals as vertical bars.

Figure 3, which is based on equation 1, indicates that democratic breakdown and democratic recession decrease the number of terrorist attacks three to five years after the democratic backsliding occurred by approximately 19 to 23 terrorist attacks per year. (90% confidence intervals four years after onset = $[-51.74; -0.16]$), while the short-term effect is also negative but statistically insignificant.) It indicates that Hypothesis 1, which states that democratic backsliding decreases the level of terrorism in a country compared to democracies without autocratization, does hold for our sample. Furthermore, Figure 3 shows a placebo test whether trajectories of terrorism are significantly different in countries with and without democratic backsliding prior to onset. We find evidence that countries with democratic backsliding experience slightly more domestic terrorism prior to the onset. In other words, the finding questions the parallel trend assumptions and thus weakens the causal interpretation of the difference-in-differences estimator presented in Figure 3.

Figure 4 shows the empirical results concerning Hypothesis 2, which states that a decay of political participation and civil liberties in autocracies has a positive and significant effect on domestic terrorist incidents: Autocratic consolidation increases the number of terrorist attacks by approximately 14 terrorist attacks up to one year after the onset of an autocratic consolidation (90% CI = $[1.77; 27.89]$).

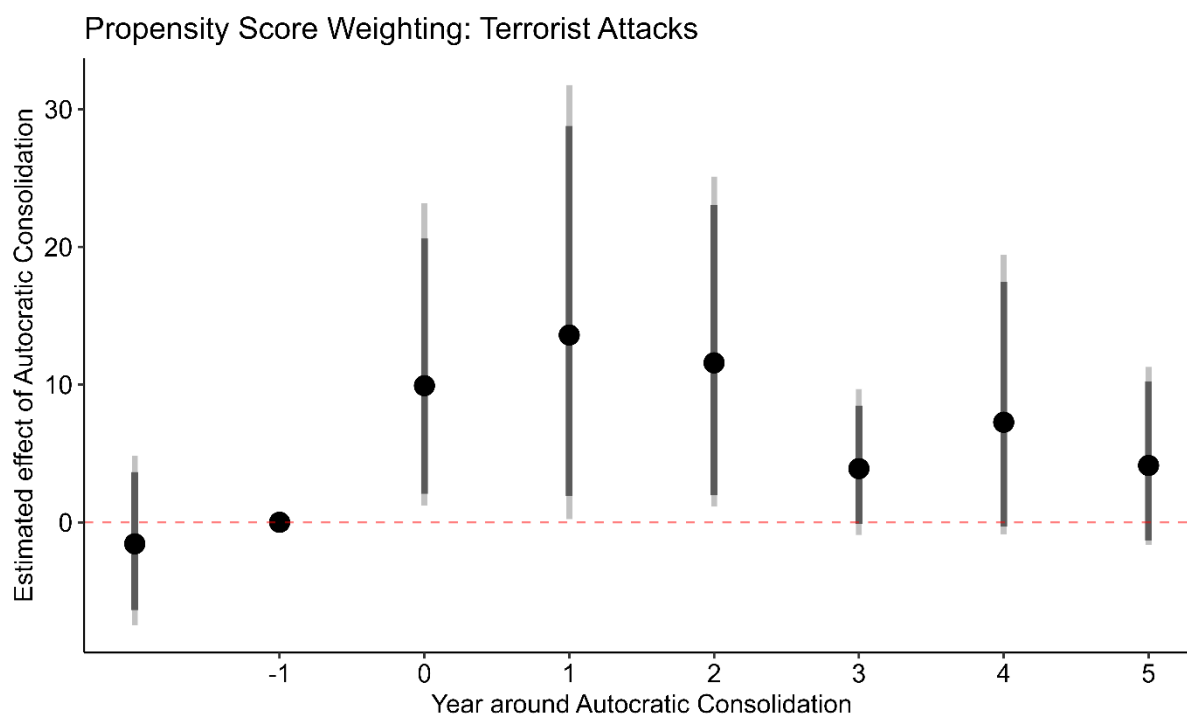


Figure 4: Estimated average effects of autocratic consolidation on domestic terrorism

The estimates are based on the matching method that adjusts for the treatment and covariate histories during the two years prior to the democratic breakdown/recession, i.e., $L = 2$. The estimates for the average effects of democratic breakdown/recession are shown for the period of five years after the treatment, i.e., $F = 0, 1, \dots, 4$ with 90% and 95% bootstrap confidence intervals as vertical bars.

In addition, autocratic consolidation causes a growth of domestic attacks from two to five years after autocratization started, while the 90% CIs are insignificant. Furthermore, we do not find any effect of autocratic consolidation in the placebo tests. Countries with and without autocratic consolidation experience similar domestic terrorism trajectories prior to the onset of autocratic consolidation. Thus, the parallel trend assumption holds as indicated by the statistically indistinguishable point estimates prior to the onset. Therefore, we conclude that autocracies with a recent autocratic consolidation episode that led to a decline of political participation or civil liberties are more vulnerable to domestic terrorism compared to other autocracies and to democracies in the short run. In conclusion, the empirical evidence supports the notion that autocratic consolidation increases the probability for terrorism.

Finally, Figure 5 shows the results of estimating the effect of an autocratization onset on the number of terrorist incidents between 1970 and 2020 *irrespective* of which regime type the autocratization onset occurred in. This estimation tests Hypothesis 3, which assumes that autocratization, regardless of the type of political regime prior to autocratization, does not affect the level of domestic terrorism in a country. The empirical evidence shown in Figure 4 supports that assumption. We see only small fluctuations in terrorism trajectories prior to the onset of autocratization. However, the point estimates in the placebo tests are statistically insignificant and there is no clear trend in domestic terrorism prior to the onset of autocratization. Thus the parallel trend assumptions holds.

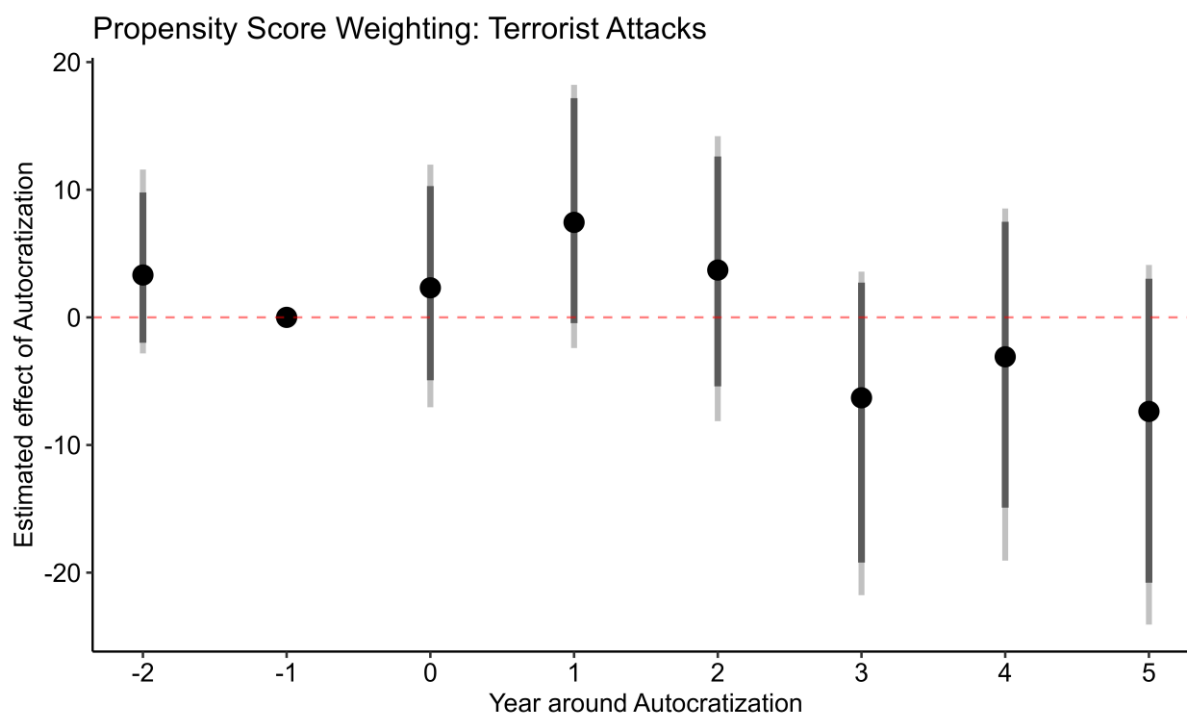


Figure 5: Estimated average effects of autocratization on domestic terrorism

The estimates are based on the matching method that adjusts for the treatment and covariate histories during the two years prior to the autocratization, i.e., $L = 2$. The estimates for the average effects of autocratization are shown for the period of five years after the treatment, i.e., $F = 0, 1, \dots, 4$ with 90% and 95% bootstrap confidence intervals as vertical bars.

In the first two years after an autocratization onset, the estimated effect is almost non-existing, as shown by the point estimates as well the wide confidence intervals. In year three to five after the onset of an episode, the effect of autocratization becomes more negative but is statistically insignificant. The average effect of autocratization is predicted to be -5 and -10 attacks per year, while the bootstrap confidence intervals are wide. In sum, however, we find no empirical evidence that autocratization in general affects the volume of terrorist attacks, which is in line with Hypothesis 3.

Finally, we undertake several robustness tests, which, briefly summarized, find that the main results on the relationship between autocratization and domestic terrorism are robust, independent from the model specification and the selected estimators.

First, one concern is that the threshold for detecting autocratization with the ERT approach – our treatment variable – affects our results. According to Pelke and Croissant,⁹⁹ different thresholds seem to be plausible when examining autocratization effects. Thus, we control for autocratization episodes and respective sub-categories with an annual decline on the EDI of 0.04 or more as the start of an episode, followed by an overall decline of 0.08 throughout the episode. Second, we set these thresholds to an annual decline on the EDI of 0.06 or more as the start of an episode, followed by an overall decline of 0.12 throughout the episode. In sections E and F of the Supplementary Appendix, we report the results using these definitions of our treatment variables. Democratic backsliding (Figures E1 and F1) has a negative effect as in the main model (see Figure 3). In addition, Figure E2 and F2 re-estimate Figure 4 and confirm the findings shown in the main results. A regressed autocracy has a positive effect

on the number of terrorist attacks in the short run, up to two years after the treatment start. In contrast, autocratization among all regime types has a null effect as in the main models (see Figure E3 and F3).

Second, we re-estimate the previously performed models representing the average causal effect of autocratization on terrorism incidence up to ten years after the treatment while assuming that the potential outcome only depends on the treatment history up to two years back. As shown in section D of the Supplementary Appendix, the main results hold. Democratic backsliding decreases the number of terrorist attacks two to five years after treatment. Figure D2 shows more mixed findings regarding the effect of autocratic consolidation on terrorism.

Third, we test if our measures of autocratization drive our results. In the main analysis, we measure autocratization, democratic breakdown, and autocratic consolidation with the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) approach. As shown in sections B and C of the Supplementary Appendix, the main results hold when using a simpler approach to measuring autocratization. This approach compares the EDI score at t with the score at $t+1$. In section B we use an annual change rate of 0.1 to detect our treatments, while in section C we use an annual change rate of 0.05. In particular, Figures B1 and C1 confirm the findings shown in Figure 3: Democratic backsliding causes a decline in the number of terrorist attacks of approximately 20 attacks from three to five years after an onset of the respective episode. Figures B2 and C3, in contrast, show different findings compared to Figure 4. Figure B2 indicates that autocratic consolidation causes a 10 attacks annual increase after the onset of a respective episode, while the effect is statistically insignificant. Figure C3 shows that autocratic consolidation measured as an EDI change of at least 0.05 does not affect the number of terrorist attacks, indicating that only substantial autocratization episodes have an impact on the number of terrorist attacks. In addition, Figures B3 and C4 show that autocratization onset does not cause an increase or decline in the number of terrorist attacks, thereby confirming the main results shown in Figure 5.

Fourth, our findings are robust to alternative matching and weighting approaches. Figure G4 – G6 show results by a) not matching on covariates, b) Mahalanobis distance matching, c) propensity score matching, d) covariate balancing propensity scores (CBPS) matching, and e) covariate balancing propensity scores (CBPS) weighting. These different specifications all show nearly identical findings and thus increase the robustness of the difference-in-differences estimators. In sum, the robustness tests support the main findings that democratic backsliding decreases the number of terrorist attacks, while autocratic consolidation increases terrorism.

6. Conclusion

In the age of autocratization, a rapidly growing number of studies aim to understand the causes, conditions, and consequences of democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation. Political violence in its different manifestations is a common concomitant of autocratization. So far, however, autocratization research has focused on exploring the instrumental role of political violence as an outcome of state repression employed by incumbent rulers who aim at autocratizing the political regime, while conflict and terrorism studies have examined how political violence affects autocratization and, in particular, the erosion and breakdown of democratic systems. What is missing from many discussions

is whether and how autocratization affects the level of non-state violence. In particular, the thriving literature on cross-national variation in terrorism has neglected the nexus between autocratization and domestic terrorism. This study aspired to reorient and refocus research on terrorism and democracy by addressing this gap. We asked if a decline of democratic regime attributes affects the volume of domestic terrorism in a society.

Autocratization has been glossed in the comparative politics literature as “the decline in democratic qualities of any democratic regime that may result in the weakening or the breakdown of democracy but also the recession of democratic characteristics in authoritarian regime”.¹⁰⁰ As such, it includes within its ambit what is otherwise called democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation.¹⁰¹ Based on this conceptualization of autocratization, we combined two dominant strands of thinking about intrastate violence: On the one hand, collective grievances mobilize economically disadvantaged and politically excluded sections of a society and motivate dynamics of radicalization. On the other hand, material resources and institutional capabilities shape the opportunities of actors to participate in the political process, either peacefully or with violent means. While both perspectives offer valuable insights into the emergence of intrastate violence, grievances and opportunities appear to work differently in different contexts of regime change. Based on these considerations, we proposed two theoretical arguments: First, democratic backsliding dampens domestic terrorism. Decreasing levels of political rights and civil liberties close windows of opportunity for violent actors. Second, autocratic consolidation makes autocracies more vulnerable to terrorism. Autocratic hardening increases grievances among previously marginalized and now silenced groups and incentivizes violent action. Different forms of autocratization may thus stimulate or suppress terrorist activities.

Future research will probably bring more nuance to these assumptions. For example, the consequences associated with democratic backsliding, for example a decline in civil liberties, may not impact the lives of all citizens in similar ways but can differ across all the population. In ethnically diverse societies, ethnic minorities may suffer more from the detrimental impact of autocratization than the dominant ethnic group.¹⁰² Moreover, we do not fully conceptualize the causal mechanisms underlying the processes addressed in our stylized assumptions. In addition, autocratization processes do not occur in a vacuum; instead, a country’s history and human geography can also play an important role in the linkage between autocratization and political violence. Although our research design accounts for some of these potential confounders, it is evident that further theory-building and empirical research is warranted. While this article focuses on the macro-level analysis, it aimed to explore if there is tentative empirical evidence for our theory.

We tested the theoretical arguments empirically on time-series cross-sectional data on domestic terrorism in 182 countries between 1970 and 2020. The research design applied a difference-in-differences approach to estimate the causal impact of the treatment (autocratization) on the outcome (terrorism). We turned to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) as the most widely used terrorism dataset to measure the dependent variable: the number of domestic terrorist attacks. To operationalize the main independent variables of interest, democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation, we employed the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset. We find robust support for our argument. While the “net effect” of autocratization in general on terrorism is not significant across

different regime types and modes of autocratization, we find that democracies that undergo decay or breakdown experience a reduction in the amount of terrorism compared to democracies that do not suffer from autocratization. Conversely, autocratic consolidation makes autocracies more vulnerable to terrorism and increases the number of terrorist attacks.

Our findings have important implications for the prospects of reducing or increasing terrorist violence. In the short to medium term of one to five years, limiting democratic freedoms or civil liberties can actually make a contribution to fighting terrorism. On the other hand, turning autocracies more autocratic and, by implication, more repressive will not help to fight terrorism. In the short to medium term, it actually, and perhaps unintentionally, raises the specter of terrorism. The normative implications of these results are partially inconvenient as they might seem to provide a utilitarian justification for autocratization in terrorism-prone democracies. However, the claim that autocratization is an effective counterterrorism policy in democracies seems dubious to us. While we find that democratic backsliding tends to reduce terrorism in the short to medium term, other studies find that democratic breakdown is associated with an increase in terrorism if a country re-democratizes after an autocratization episode.¹⁰³ In other words: the short-term “counterterrorism dividend” would come with a heavy prize in the long term.

Nevertheless, we think it is important to emphasize the key insight of this study, which is that autocratization has ambivalent effects on domestic terrorism. What this study was unable to examine, and thus what should be explored in future studies, is, first, which elements of democratic backsliding in democracies have a dampening effect on the number of attacks by domesticated terrorists. Similarly, for autocracies, the question would be which specific elements of autocratic consolidation have an effect on terrorism. Second, our study has focused on the short- and medium-term effects of autocratization. It would thus not be wise to rush to judgment about the general relation of autocratization to domestic terrorism. It is necessary to move more carefully instead and to look at the longer-term effects as well, especially since research on violence and terrorism certainly provides evidence that levels of democracy or democratic collapse have a lasting and durable impact on terrorism.

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⁴⁴ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”, 5.

⁴⁵ There is a plethora of concepts intended to capture democratic decline such as “autocratization”, “democratic backsliding”, “democratic breakdown”, “deconsolidation”, “democratic regression”, “democratic transgression”, or “democratic decay” (see Johannes Gerschewski, “Erosion or Decay? Conceptualizing Causes and Mechanisms of Democratic Regression,” *Democratization* 28, no. 1 (2021): 43–62; Pelke and Croissant, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Autocratization Episodes”; Jee, Lueders and Myrick, “Towards a unified approach to research on democratic backsliding,”). Lührmann and Lindberg, whose definition of autocratization this paper builds on, distinguish between democratic recession and democratic breakdown, which both take place in democracies, and autocratic consolidation. Democratic recession and breakdown both have the same starting point in a (minimally) democratic regime, and empirically many democratic recessions in the early twenty-first century are right-censored, meaning that autocratization had not yet terminated before the country experienced either a gap in coding or the end of its coding period. Therefore, we use summarized cases of democratic erosion without (“recession”) and with regime collapse (“breakdown”) under the notion of *democratic backsliding*.

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- ⁶² called INT_ANY variable
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- ⁶⁸ Lüthmann and Lindberg, "A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?", 1098-1100.
- ⁶⁹ Amanda B. Edgell et al., *Episodes of Regime Transformation Dataset (v1.0) Codebook* (2020), <https://github.com/vdeminstitute/ERT>.
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- ⁹⁷ Whenever an autocratization episode ends, the following country-year is seen as a control case. All country-years that are not coded as the treatment (= autocratization) are controls, also when the country has received the treatment in previous years.

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