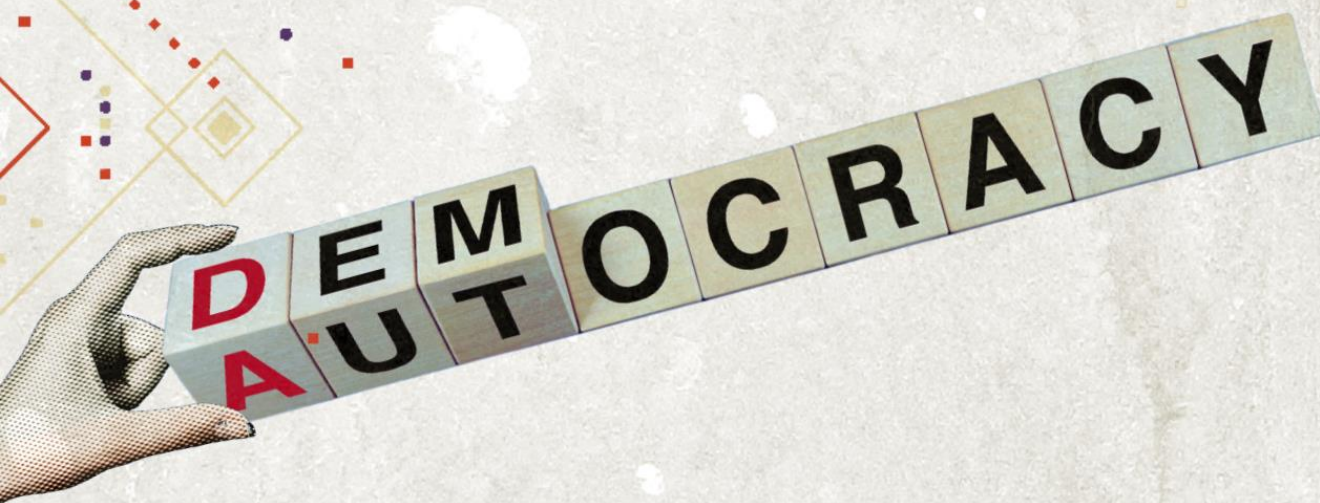**IAST WORKSHOP**
AUTOCRATIC RULE & DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING
JUNE 23 & 24, 2025

INFO & REGISTRATION

ABSTRACTS BOOKLET

CONFERENCE VENUE

Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse (IAST)
1, Esplanade de l'Université - 31 000 Toulouse, France
Auditorium 3 – JJ Laffont (Ground Floor)

ORGANIZERS

Anne Degrave (IAST/TSE)
Felix Dwinger (IAST/TSE)
Violeta Hass (IAST/TSE)
Horacio Larreguy (ITAM)
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Ahmed Ezzeldin Mohamed (IAST/TSE)
Alberto Simpser (ITAM)

CONFERENCE SECRETARIAT

Marion Maupomé & Valérie Nowaczyk
political.science.conf@tse-fr.eu

ABSTRACTS

Jane Esberg   *Reel Politik: Repression, Democracy, and the Hollywood Blacklist*

Session: Policies, Ideologies, & Identities

Can politicians in democracies punish citizens for political beliefs, despite civil liberties protections? If so, how? I argue that elected officials can partner with illiberal civil society groups for the purpose of political suppression. I test this theory with evidence from the "Hollywood Blacklist" of the 1950s, which developed from the work of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Pairing archival records with an online movie database, I first establish that the committee had significant negative effects on victims, as well as a broader chilling effect on political themes in film. Qualitative and quantitative evidence shows that Congress aligned with radical anti-communist groups to enforce the lists, through pressure campaigns threatening boycotts and picketing. My results have implications for how even strong democratic institutions can be subverted.

Felix Haass   *Selective University Admissions as a Strategy of Autocratic Rule*

Session: Educating the Masses

Universities present a dilemma for autocrats: they are often fertile grounds for anti-regime protests, but also necessary for educating a skilled workforce that ensures economic productivity. Solving this dilemma through indoctrination and repression can be costly and inefficient. I investigate a third strategy autocrats use to resolve this trade-off: strategic student admissions. By preferentially admitting regime-loyal students, indoctrination becomes easier and monitoring less costly. To counter efficiency problems, however, autocrats enforce admission criteria selectively: they value loyalty signals more in fields more likely to generate dissent — the social sciences/humanities — and less strongly in fields less exposed to critical thinking and more relevant for economic productivity, such as the natural/technical sciences. I find empirical support for these implications using detailed admission records from more than 234,000 university applications in the former German Democratic Republic. By unpacking a key repressive strategy this study clarifies how universities can help to stabilize autocracies.

Mai Hassan *The Shape of Opposition Mobilization and Regime Repression in the Wake of the 1989 Sudan Coup*

Session: Political Control

Formal civil society organizations, like trade unions and political parties, are useful for organizing collective action. But this ability to mobilize society is why they are targeted under authoritarian regimes. In response, we should expect civil society to innovate new tactics and behavioral tactics in the face of regime attempts at political control. Taken at face value, some of these innovations may seem inefficient. But in the face of regime actions, these innovations are necessary transformations that help with organizational survival and society's continued mobilization.

Barton Lee   *Drain the Swamp: A Theory of Anti-Elite Populism*

(with Gabriele Gratton)

Session: Policies, Ideologies & Identities

We study a model of popular demand for anti-elite populist reforms that drain the swamp: replace experienced public servants with novices that will only acquire experience with time. Voters benefit from experienced public servants because they are more effective at delivering public goods and more competent at detecting emergency threats. However, public servants' policy preferences do not always align with those of voters. This tradeoff produces two key forces in our model: public servants' incompetence spurs disagreement between them and voters, and their effectiveness grants them more power to dictate policy. Both of these effects fuel mistrust between voters and public servants, sometimes inducing voters to drain the swamp in cycles of anti-elite populism. We study which factors can sustain a responsive democracy or induce a technocracy. When instead populism arises, we discuss which reforms may reduce the frequency of populist cycles, including recruiting of public servants and isolating them from politics. Our results support the view that a more inclusive and representative bureaucracy protects against anti-elite populism. We provide empirical evidence that lack of trust in public servants is a key force behind support for anti-elite populist parties and argue that our model helps explain the rise of anti-elite populism in large robust democracies.

Daniel Mattingly   *How Ideology Shapes Elite Politics in China*

(with Jonathan Elkobi)

Session: Policies, Ideologies & Identities

Conventional accounts of authoritarian politics argue that elites prioritize political survival, not ideology. In this paper, we challenge that view by demonstrating how ideology shapes elite competition in China. We argue that autocratic leaders use ideology to signal policy preferences and rely on personal networks to identify officials aligned with their ideological vision. We build a new dataset of over 50,000 speeches and 40,000 policy documents from local officials in China and develop a novel method to measure ideological alignment with Xi Jinping. We find that elite conflict revolves around socialism and economic issues. Local officials with personal ties to Xi who publicly align with his socialist ideology are more likely to advance in their careers. They are also more likely to implement socialist policies, with negative consequences for economic growth. These findings suggest that, contrary to dominant theories, ideology plays a central role in structuring elite politics under authoritarianism.

Monika Nalepa   *From Anti-authoritarian Resistance to Democratic Resilience: Legacies of Solidarity in Poland's Backsliding Era*

(with Hanna Folsz)

Session: Collective Action, Institutions, & Political Accountability

I trace this argument by examining the first decade of Sudan's Islamist regime (1989–1999). I show how the repression initially applied meant to target those elements of mobilization that were most effective in Sudan's prior democratic period (1985–1989), and how civil society's response were innovations that allowed for continued mobilization given the parameters of repression.

Agustina Paglayan   *Education and Democracy: An Uphill Battle*

Session: Educating the Masses

This talk will present findings from two empirical studies that explore what the non-democratic roots of mass education imply for (1) the characteristics of education systems in democracies and (2) the political behavior of citizens in democracies. The first study, based on original data from 160 countries between 1945 and 2021, reveals that while both non-democratic and democratic regimes use schooling to indoctrinate, the content of that indoctrination differs significantly: in democracies, education systems promote uncritical reverence for democratic norms and institutions. The second study, based on evidence from Mexico, argues that non-democratic education systems can shape the functioning of subsequent democratic regimes by using primary schools (and the curriculum) to discourage long-term political participation. Taken together, these studies illuminate how the authoritarian origins of mass education systems continue to shape education and politics even after their demise. These enduring legacies, I argue, make the realization of genuinely democratic education an ongoing and uphill battle.

Bryn Rosenfeld   *Risk Attitudes and Political Participation under Autocracy*

Session: Collective Action, Institutions, & Political Accountability

In nondemocracies, such varied political acts as protest participation, voting for the opposition, and abstaining from supporting regime candidates entail risks. Yet risk attitudes have seldom been studied directly in authoritarian settings. This paper investigates how citizens' attitudes toward risk shape political participation under authoritarian rule; it proposes a theory of how affective factors interact with an individual's baseline tolerance for risk to explain risky political behavior—even when the strong organizational ties emphasized by exiting literature on high-risk participation are absent. Empirically, I test this argument using survey data from Russia on expressions of regime support (and evasive responding), voting behavior (including non-voting and opposition voting); and a survey experiment on willingness to protest after regime repression. This paper is the first to benchmark the predictive power of risk attitudes relative to other known determinates of regime support and voting behavior in an autocracy. It also contributes to our understanding of how ordinary citizens overcome a baseline aversion to political risk-taking.

Mehdi Shadmehr *Missing Discussions*

(with Arda Gitmez and James Robinson)

Session: Collective Action, Institutions, & Political Accountability

Institutional constraints to prevent abuses of power have long been considered essential in Western political thought. An intellectual tradition emerged to justify them. We identify a puzzle: such a tradition did not arise in the Islamic world for over a millennium — from the seventh to the eighteenth century — despite widespread recognition of the potential for abuse. We develop a model to explain this difference in normative traditions. Islamic law was more encompassing than divine law in the West, making it easier for citizens to detect and respond to transgressions through collective action. The core assumptions of the Islamic normative tradition made the collective action approach to political accountability preferable to the institutional approach favored in the West.

Alexandra Siegel *Co-optation and Coercion of Online Influencers: Evidence from Saudi Wikipedia*

Session: Political Control

How do authoritarian regimes use co-optation and coercion of influential internet users to control online information? This paper explores how the Saudi regime co-opted prominent Wikipedia administrators to alter content on sensitive domestic and foreign political topics. I argue that the co-optation and coercion of influential social media users offers regimes an effec- tive tool to manipulate online information environments, with greater plausible deniability and better evasion of content moderation than other forms of computational propaganda. Drawing on a recent ban of Saudi Wikipedia users for coordinated inauthentic activity, I use a two-way fixed effects design and quantitative text analysis of Wikipedia edits to evaluate how banned users' behavior compares to the activity of non-banned users before and after their reported co-optation. I find that Saudi co-optation led to increased editing of pages referencing sensi- tive religious and political topics, particularly during moments of crisis. This work contributes to our understanding of how authoritarian regimes have adapted longstanding strategies of co-optation, coercion, and information control in the digital age.

Stephane Wolton *Unmasking the Ennemies: A Theory of Denunciations*

(with Tinghua Yu)

Session: Collective Action, Institutions, & Political Accountability

Denunciations are prevalent in authoritarian regimes. Citizens turn against each other to report suspicious behavior to the police state. But citizens may also have incentives to spread false information about their peers. In this context, can denunciations ever be informative? And, if so, what factors impede or facilitate the informativeness of denunciations? We design a formal model of denunciations in a large society. We show that denunciations are informative despite the certainty that some denunciations are false. We highlight the complementarities between using informants and relying on denunciations for the secret police. We briefly discuss how the secret police can encourage denunciations and what it gains and what it potentially loses from incentivizing people to inform on one another.

Ekaterina Zhuravskaya *Curtailing False News, Amplifying Truth*

(with Sergei Guriev, Emeric Henry, Théo Marquis)

Session: Educating the Masses

We develop a comprehensive framework to evaluate policy measures aimed at curbing false news dissemination on social media. Using a randomized experiment on Twitter and $\mathbb{X}$ during the 2022 and 2024 U.S. elections, we assess priming for misinformation awareness, fact-checking, confirmation clicks, and content consideration prompts. Priming proves most effective in reducing false news sharing while preserving true news dissemination. We build and structurally estimate a model of sharing, motivated by partisan persuasion, partisan signaling, and reputation. The model identifies three channels of policy influence: (i) updating perceived veracity and partisanship of content, (ii) raising reputation salience, and (iii) increasing engagement cost. We find that differences in policy impact are explained by the salience and cost channels. Priming is best at enhancing reputation salience at minimal cost. Though content-neutral, it performs almost as well as fact-checking in updating veracity. The salience channel is particularly strong when users encounter uncontroversially true content.