ADVANCED COMPARATIVE POLITICS

MEDIA CENSORSHIP IN DEMOCRACIES.

A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECT OF TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND ONLINE CENSORSHIP ON GOVERNMENT POPULARITY.

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Karolin Schulze, Wai Tak Tung

Student ID: 1675545, 1713671

University of Mannheim

Faculty of Social Sciences

CONTENTS

1 ABSTRACT

It is well known that media censorship in authoritarian regimes can effectively boost regime popularity. Will media censorship in democracies also be successful to boost government popularity? By examining 10 democratic countries from 2008 to 2018, we empirically showed that 1) employing censorship in print and broadcasting media can actually lead to a lower government approval rate, 2) employing internet censorship can boost the government popularity when there is a large population of internet users. Our findings also yield important implications for the study on constitutional checks and balances and accountability of democratic governments.

Keywords: Censorship. Democracies. Internet. Traditional Media.

2 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the US - designated the world's leading democracy - has experienced a decline in democracy and press freedom. Even though not the only country, it is perhaps the most surprising to many to show such a development. This decline can be traced back, among other factors, to the actions of the government, or the president to be more precise. Repeated attempts to discredit the mainstream media along with threats to restrict peoples' freedom of expression as well as the freedom of action of the media business were some of the actions contributing to that trend (Abramowitz, 2019). In 2020, a new US president was elected.

The US is just one example among many of a country in which the head of government's actions altered public opinion and subsequently led to action by the people turning out to

be detrimental for the incumbent government. This not only exhibits the importance of public opinion in democratic systems, but also demonstrates potential consequences of government censorship. It raises for us the following question which also constitutes the research question of this paper: How does government censorship affect public opinion in democracies?

In response to that question, we developed two hypotheses on how government effort to censor broadcast and print media and to censor the internet affect the approval rates of governments. We found that broadcast and print media censorship[1] with its high potential to backfire has a negative impact on public opinion while internet censorship is only successful when a sufficiently high percentage of the population uses the internet.

Existing research has extensively dealt with the relationship between media and public opinion (Zaller, 1991; Siegel 2013; Benedictis-Kressner et al., 2019), finding that not only the media influence public opinion and public opinion the behavior of political actors, but also that elites and governments can impact public opinion. Censorship in authoritarian regimes is also a popular topic among researchers (Cho et al., 2017; Gläßel and Paula, 2020), while few research deals with censorship in democracies (e.g., Kelleam and Stein, 2016). We combined these two strands of research by examining how government censorship efforts directed at different types of media in affect approval for the incumbent government in democracies.

The paper is structured as follows: First, in a short Literature Review, we mainly introduced definitions for basic concepts constituting our research. In a subsequent Theory section, we described the theory and mechanisms behind it, before proceeding to illustrate our

[1] We used the terms broadcast and print media and traditional media interchangeably opposed to the internet as a another type of media.

methodology. Finally, after an analysis of our data, we present results combined with a discussion on them to finish with a summarizing conclusion.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Censorship and Public Opinion

Public opinion describes the "aggregation of the views of individuals in society" (Carey, 2021). It functions as a link between the people and their government, allowing them to inform decision-makers of their preferences and is therefore indispensable for modern democracies.

If we say that government authorities are censoring certain types of information, this means that these authorities are increasing the costs accessing and spreading particular types of information (Roberts, 2020, p. 403). The main purpose of doing so is to maintain government approval and accountability (Roberts, 2018). This is because censorship decreases citizens' chances of accessing and spreading information that are anti-government; and increase the pro-government information (Roberts, 2018, p.21-22; Roberts, 2020, p. 403), therewith attempting to alter public opinion. In the context of this paper, if censorship effort is successful in traditional media and the Internet, we therefore expect that it influenced people to formulate more pro-government attitudes and opinions because they were more exposed to pro-government information and less to anti government information (Roberts, 2018).

In this paper, we focused on two types of censorship mechanisms that influence public opinion on government popularity: friction and flooding. Friction refers to the concept

of “making certain type of information more difficult to access” (Roberts, 2020, p. 403). Government authorities can make information more difficult to access by directly increasing the time and money required to access information (Roberts, 2020). Government can also indirectly increase the cost of accessing certain information by not collecting certain data and restrict citizens effort to collect such data (Roberts, 2018).

Flooding refers to a more indirect mechanism that increases the cost of accessing information that the government wants to conceal from the public by decreasing the cost of a particular type of information (Roberts, 2018). Governments decrease the cost of certain information by "introducing a massive amount of information" so that it takes a lower cost for citizens to access. (Roberts, 2020, p.403). They can flood the traditional media and internet with either propaganda that is pro-government or irrelevant information as long as they distract people from the information the government wants to conceal (Roberts, 2018, p. 80, Roberts, 2020, p.403).

In the following theory section, we further explain how friction and flooding strategies are applied by leaders in broadcast and print media and the internet and how the difference in the visibility of censorship in traditional media and the internet accounts for their differing effect on influencing citizens to formulate pro-government attitudes.

4 THEORY

Traditional Media Censorship and Support for Government

In recent years, democratic countries have witnessed a decline in press freedom. Repucci (2019) showed that 19% of Free countries in the Freedom House data had witnessed a decline

in press freedom from 2014-2019. The literature on the topic suggests that the reasons for such decline in press media come in threefold.

First, democratic governments are indirectly influencing the traditional media. Although direct suppression is not a common practice in democratic societies, democratic governments were reported to influence press media indirectly (Lee and Lin, 2006; Repucci, 2019). These indirect efforts of censorship included e.g., selectively distributing broadcasting licences or preferential financial support for pro-government media (Repucci, 2019).

Secondly, a decline in press advertising revenue in democratic societies might also contribute to the decline in traditional media freedom. There has been a global decline of print advertising revenue since 2017 (Statista, 2021). Petrova (2011) has shown that the more advertising revenue newspaper companies allocate, the more independent they are from political influence in empirical studies on 19th century newspapers. This suggests that a decline in advertising revenue can make traditional media more prone to rely on government sources and cut highly costly investigative journalism as suggested by Roberts (2018).

Thirdly, the rise of right wing populism also accounts for the decline in press media freedom (Repucci, 2019). In recent years, right wing populist parties have gained a lot of popularity in European countries, most prominently the rise of AfD in the 2017 Bundestag election, and the Hungarian Fidesz which has been the ruling party since 2010. Indeed, in a cross-national study from 1980 to 2014, Kenny (2020) showed a positive relationship between populist ruling and a decline in traditional media freedom.

Media Bias and Political Backlash

If the state intended to exercise more direct censorship in print media and broadcasting media, this implies that they needed some sort of control over the editorial board or connection to the broadcasting network to carry out propaganda in traditional media (Gläßel and Paula, 2020; Roberts, 2018). Propaganda and editorial control over the traditional media not only are rarely observed in democratic societies (Lee and Lin, 2006); more importantly, if democratic leaders intended to do so, this would cause political backlash as such kind of censorship would be visible to the public. When censorship effort becomes blatantly visible, empirical studies showed that citizens who could recognise the censorship would develop a grievance over the fact that information is hidden from them and such grievances would increase their interest in the censored material (Gläßel and Paula, 2020; Huang, 2018; Pan and Siegel, 2020). Accordingly, once citizens find credible alternative sources to disprove the government propaganda, this will make citizens distrust the government and reduce the support for the government (Gläßel and Paula, 2020). There is also a long term effect of backlash caused by strong censorship. Once citizens were aware of censorship efforts from the government, they would resist accessing the biased press media in the future (Geddes and Zaller, 1989). This means that the stronger the censorship, the more likely it will backfire and cause backlash and therefore decrease the people's trust and approval of the government. This motivates us to propose the following hypothesis:

H1: The higher a democratic government's effort to censor the print and broadcasting media, the lower is the approval rate of the government.

Internet Censorship and Support for Government

In 2017, the South Korean National Intelligence Service was exposed to having hired commenters to spread pro-government opinions and suppress government critics online to influence the 2012 presidential election (Freedom House, 2017). This shows that even highly democratic regimes employ flooding strategies to boost the popularity of their democratically elected leader. However, what distinguishes censorship of the internet from government effort to censor more traditional types of media?

First, democratic leaders will be motivated to censor the internet because the internet is a place where people can both access and spread information. Unlike traditional media where information communication is unilaterally conducted from the media to TV viewers, radio listeners or newspaper readers (top-down), the internet provides not only a vertical stream of information from the media sources to the recipients, but at the same time a platform for internet users to exchange information (bottom up) (Kramp, 2015). Thus, the internet is also a space for more negative information on government performance or rather information on government wrong-doings or shortcomings to be disseminated faster and easier than via traditional media which makes censorship efforts more attractive for governments.

Secondly, conducting online censorship via frictions and flooding can avoid potential political backlash because of its deniability. Other than fear, the third censorship mechanism Roberts (2018) identifies and which is a popular means of oppressing journalists in the broadcast and print media even in democracies, friction and flooding is hardly detectable on the internet without prior knowledge or higher awareness of such mechanisms. Moreover, it is hard for citizens to retrace who is responsible for internet filtering or the denial of access to certain websites.

What further differentiates internet censorship from censorship of broadcast or print media is its relative novelty and rapid development in recent years with the number of smartphone users worldwide increasing in the span of 10 years from roughly 1 billion in 2012 two more than 3 billion in 2018 (O'Dea, 2020) and the number of internet users worldwide in percent of the population increasing from about 23% in 2008 to almost 51% in 2018, with individual countries recording considerably higher numbers (Figure 1). Different percentages of internet users over time and in different countries constitute a varying perception for the need of and the effects of internet censorship. The more people in a country use the internet, as illustrated above, the more people can access and communicate information about the government, and in case of negative information are more likely to coordinate mass activities like protests that can harm government approval rates and thus lower the government's probability to be reelected. We therefore expect censorship to be more effective in maintaining or increasing government approval when there are more people using the internet. When fewer people use the internet, since they don't represent the majority of the population, their opinion on the government should not have any significant effect on overall government approval. Therefore, it is an arbitrary choice of the government to either employ or not employ censorship on the internet since it would likely neither significantly boost or reduce approval rates. This motivates us to propose the following hypothesis:

H2: The higher the government effort spent on internet censorship, the higher the support for the regime, but only when there is a sufficient percentage of internet users among the population.

5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Question and Method

The question we were interested in was how government censorship efforts in democracies affect public opinion on a country's leader. To approach the solution to that puzzle, we employed a simple OLS regression analysis to test for the effects of government efforts to censor broadcast and print media vs the internet on peoples' opinion towards their country's head of government.

5.2 Case Selection and Time Frame

The focus of our research was on censorship in democracies. Therefore, our cases comprised only democratic countries with a high polity2 score (8-10) (Marshall and Gurr, 2020) to control for differences in autocratic regimes and democracies. Among the ten countries selected, four represented the East Asia pacific region (Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines), three were European and Central Asian countries (Bulgaria, France, Hungary) and two were situated in Latin America the Caribbean (Argentina, Brazil), while the last one was the United States of America to represent North America. Through this case selection, the analysis was designed to represent democracies world-wide in as many different regions as possible. We only included countries for which data on government approval explicitly referred to the head of government. Due to data availability, we could not account for the remaining regions where democratic states can be located, like South Asia or South Africa. The time frame included observations from 2008 to 2018. Thereby we avoided the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007. The latest data available was from 2018, which therefore determined

the ending point of the data.

5.3 Operationalization

5.3.1 Dependent Variable: Approval Rate

Since we were interested in how government effort in broadcast and print media censorship opposed to government effort in internet censorship affects the popularity of a country's leader among its population, we gathered data on censorship effort and government popularity for 11 countries for every year from 2008 to 2018. Leader or government popularity was operationalised as citizens' approval for their country's head of government, measured in percentages of people who expressed a favorable opinion towards their country's president (six cases) or prime minister (four cases). A higher value for this variable indicated higher approval. This data was drawn from the Executive Approval Database (Carlin et al., 2019).

5.3.2 Key Independent Variables

1) Government Broadcast and Print Media Censorship Effort

Our key explanatory variables represented the government's effort to censor two different types of media, namely broadcast and print media opposed to the internet, and internet users in a country. Data for broadcast and print media censorship were drawn from the 10^{th} version of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database (Coppedge et al., 2020). Government effort to censor broadcast and print media was operationalized as the frequency of direct or indirect government attempts to censor the print and broadcast media. The lower the score of this variable, the more direct and routine censorship was employed by the government in Print and Broadcast media.

2) Interacting Variables: Government Internet Censorship and Internet Users

Government censorship effort of the internet was operationalized as the scope and severity of government attempts to censor the internet from filtering to denial-of-service attacks to Internet lockdowns with data from V-dem (Coppedge et al, 2020). The lower the score of this variable, the more extensively measures like filtering, denial-of-service attacks and internet lockdown were employed by the government.

The more people use the internet, the more likely people are to use it to search for negative information on their government and to discuss collective action. This should affect public opinion on and how extensive the government engages in online censorship. Therefore we included a variable for Internet Users, operationalised as the percentage of individuals using the internet out of the whole population of a country. Data on internet users was drawn from the World Bank (The World Bank, 2021c).

5.3.3 Controls

Media Corruption

We also counted for how corrupt journalists, broadcasters and publishers are. Media corruption was controlled because the more corrupted they are, the more likely they would be bribed by the government to publish biased information. Meanwhile, a more biased media can influence people to form pro government opinion (Cho et al, 2017). Data for media corruption was drawn from the V-Dem database (Coppedge et al, 2020). Higher values indicate less corruption.

Resource

How much natural resources a country possesses was also controlled for. It was operationalised as the total natural resources rents in terms of % of GDP. This variable is controlled for because Egorov et al. (2009) showed that the less oil reserve a country has, the less likely a dictator would engage in censorship. On the other hand, increased resource rent also suggests that the government has more resources to spend on public infrastructures and social welfare that can increase the government legitimacy, or they can also use the resource rent for self-serving purpose and spend less on public infrastructures which negatively affect government popularity (Barma et al, 2012; Zhuang and Zang, 2016). Data on Total natural resources rents in % of GDP was drawn from the World Bank (The World Bank, 2021b).

GDP Growth

A country's economic performance was also controlled for. This is because Kellam and Stein (2016) have shown that the worse the economy is, the more likely the media is censored; and an empirical study in Brazil showed that the better the economy is doing, the higher approval rate is for president (Ferreira and Sakurai, 2013). Data on GDP growth per country was drawn from the World Bank (The World Bank, 2021a).

6 ANALYSIS

For the analysis of our two hypotheses we regressed government approval on government internet censorship in interaction with the percentage of internet users in a country and on government broadcast and print media censorship effort. Our data consisted of a total of 110 observations made up of ten countries and ten observations each, spanning data collected

for the years 2008 to 2018. Table 1 depicts summary statistics for all variables employed. Also illustrated in the boxplot in Figure 2 the upper left corner, the minimum and maximum values show the variance in government approval ratings in selected democracies from 2008 to 2018, ranging from about 13% minimum to maximum close to 81%. The mean of 42.8% and a standard deviation of 13.3 reflect generally moderate approval for governments in democracies.

The boxplots in Figure 2 on the upper right and lower left in addition to summary statistics in Table 1 further display the distribution of our independent variables. The high values of the median and the lower quartile for internet censorship effort indicate few internet censorship effort in a majority of our cases, while observations for traditional media censorship are more balanced with a similar amount of cases lying below as above the media. Still, for broadcast and print media censorship too, the majority of cases is situated above the median which corresponds to the notion of democracies at most moderately employing censorship.

The increase of internet users over the years as depicted in Figure 1 is partly represented in Table 1 too with a minimum percentage of internet users at 6.2% and the maximum at about 96%. The boxplot in the lower right in Figure 2 further shows that three quarters of the observations possess a value above 50%.

Simple regressions of censorship on approval and control variables on our main explanatory variables can be seen in Figure 3. Accordingly, without controlling for any confounding or interacting factors, internet censorship effort increases approval while an environment with less censorship on broadcast and print media has a positive effect on approval rates as shown in the two graphs on the top. According to the graph in the lower left, without controlling

for anything else, an increase in internet users is associated with less free media. The last graph in the upper right depicts how media corruption and traditional media censorship are related; less corruption means less censorship effort, more corruption is related to higher censorship efforts.

7 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We first tested a simple model regressing approval rate on internet censorship interacted with internet users and broadcast and print media Censorship. The coefficient of the latter as displayed in Table 1 turned out to be statistically significant with a p-value below 0.1, while all other coefficients were statistically significant with p-values lower than 0.05. We then controlled for media corruption which we expected to influence the effect of broadcast and print media censorship on approval rate. However, since it did not appear to have any noteworthy impact, we dropped it in Model 3.

We decided on Model 3 to be our final model which includes all variables excluding media corruption. Except for the intercept and resource, their coefficients continued to be statistically significant with a p-value below 0.01, only the coefficient for broadcast and print media censorship in this model too shows statistically significance with a p-value lower than 0.1. The Adjusted R square in our third model further increased from Model 1 to Model 2 to Model 3 which tells us in the case of Model 3 that the variation in our independent variables can account for 24.2% of the variation in our dependent variable approval rate.

Approval_Rate = 7.95 + 24.5 internet_censorship + 0.35 Internet + 2.68

media_censorship + 1.95 GDP_growth + 0.51 Resource + (-0.35)

internet_censorship*Internet[2]

Our first hypothesis H1 associated higher government effort to censor broadcast and print media with lower government approval rates. Our variable media censorship which represents government broadcast and print media censorship, according to our model, positively affects approval rates. We thus found that, holding everything else constant, on average, the less free the print and broadcasting media is, the lower the government approval rate. This suggested that the more censored the traditional media is, the lower the government approval rate. These findings are consistent with H1.

The positive coefficient for internet censorship indicates a negative relationship between internet censorship and government approval. However, the effect cannot be interpreted independently from the interaction term. With the coefficient for internet users being positive as well and that for the interaction effect negative, that means that with increasing percentages of internet users in a country's population, the positive effect of media freedom on government approval decreases until, with a sufficiently high percentage of internet users, the direction of the effect changes: More censorship opposed to freer media leads to an increase in approval rates.

The margins for the effect are illustrated in Figure 4. The graph shows negative estimates for the effect of Internet censorship on approval rates when approximately more than 80% of the population use the internet. We therefore found some evidences for H2 according to which, holding everything else constant, on average, when a country has a high percentage of internet users, censorship leads to higher approval rates. What the graph also illustrates,

[2]The variable "media_censorship" denotes government broadcast and print media censorship effort, "Internet" stands for internet users.

however, is a significant negative effect of censorship on approval, i.e. more people having a favorable opinion on their head of government when governments employ less censorship, but only when less than approximately 55% of the population use the internet. We would have to revise our hypothesis, saying that an increase in censorship efforts is associated with an increase in government approval when a high percentage of the population uses the internet, but a decrease in government approval when few people use the internet.

What surprised us is that when there is a low to moderate amount of internet users, the more the government censors the internet, the lower the approval rate is. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that when there is little internet coverage in a country, there are less customers to share the cost of installing internet network, which can be costly (Anders, 2020). This suggests that internet providers might charge customers a higher price for internet usage in these countries. And those who can afford the high price of internet are likely to be relatively wealthier citizens who are more likely to be well educated (Glewwe and Jacoby, 2004); or citizens who worked in technology industry, which both are cognitively sophisticated enough to identify the censorship effort from the internet. This further suggests that online censorship becomes visible in countries with a small number of users. As shown in government censorship effort in traditional media, the more visible the censorship effort is, the more likely it would cause backlash. This explains why approval rates are lower when there are few internet users. Consequently, the cognitive sophistication of the overall internet users might decrease with an increase of users who are ordinary citizens with on the aggregate relatively low cognitive sophistication to identify the censorship. This implies that censorship effort becomes less visible on the internet when there are is a higher number of internet

users which will cause less political backlash and thus a higher approval rate than under free internet.

8 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we demonstrated that censorship in traditional media and internet is prevalent in modern democratic societies. The effectiveness of censorship on these two kind of media in boosting popularity however vary. Echoing studies in authoritarian regimes (Gläßel and Paula, 2020; Roberts, 2020), we found that endorsing censorship itself can lead to political backlash especially when it is visible to the citizens. The more democratic governments censor the press and broadcasting media, the lower the government approval rate is. Meanwhile, the more democratic governments censor the internet, the higher the approval rate is when there is a high number of internet users.

There are also a few limitations in this study that further studies can drill into. First, our theory failed to capture why internet censorship is negatively correlated to government approval rate when there is a lower number of internet users in democratic countries. Further studies can examine whether the cost of internet and the educational level of internet users also have an effect on government approval rate. Second, this paper did not include an interacting variable between media censorship and the number of users who consume information via traditional media due to the lack of data. As shown in this paper, there is an interacting effect between online censorship and the population of internet users. It is natural to assume that media censorship and the population exposed to it should have an interacting effect. Further studies can examine whether this intuition is correct. Third, in

this paper we did not account for the effect of self-censorship neither in traditional media nor in respondents' replies to government approval due to the limited scope of this paper. Further studies can explore whether the outcome of a biased media is caused by external effort from the government or internal effort from the media editorial boards and whether external censorship or internal censorship causes backlash that affect government approval rate.

In a broader sense, the findings of this paper suggest that censorship is employed in democracies and effectively prime citizens to hold pro government opinions. This is a warning signal to democratic regimes' citizens as they might not be able to hold their political leaders accountable. Academics and Journalists should continue to scrutinize how democracies employ censorship considering its detrimental effect on maintaining a functioning democracies with effective check and balances.

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10 APPENDIX

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Year	110	2,013.000	3.177	2,008	2,010	2,016	2,018
Approval_Rate	110	42.820	13.309	9.976	35.537	50.669	80.069
internet_censorship	110	1.135	0.633	−0.284	0.734	1.590	1.731
media_censorship	110	1.748	0.827	0.261	1.016	2.456	3.327
Internet	110	67.727	18.583	6.220	56.014	81.560	95.898
media_corrupt	110	1.467	0.995	−0.601	0.909	2.363	2.777
Resource	110	2.032	2.500	0.018	0.051	3.123	10.732
GDP_growth	110	2.122	2.851	−6.700	0.834	3.619	10.125

Table 2: Regression of Government Approval on Government Censorship Effort

	Dependent variable:		
	Approval_Rate		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
internet_censorship	19.592***	19.940***	24.500***
	(7.262)	(7.250)	(6.843)
Internet	0.246**	0.338**	0.354***
	(0.109)	(0.132)	(0.101)
media_censorship	2.816*	4.594**	2.682*
	(1.534)	(2.112)	(1.534)
media_corrupt		−2.816	
		(2.304)	
GDP_growth			1.948***
			(0.440)
Resource			0.511
			(0.545)
internet_censorship:Internet	−0.316***	−0.316***	−0.352***
	(0.099)	(0.099)	(0.091)
Constant	23.003***	17.463*	7.950
	(8.631)	(9.731)	(8.476)
Observations	110	110	110
R^2	0.113	0.125	0.284
Adjusted R^2	0.079	0.083	0.242
Residual Std. Error	12.773 (df = 105)	12.743 (df = 104)	11.584 (df = 103)
F Statistic	3.337** (df = 4; 105)	2.981** (df = 5; 104)	6.815*** (df = 6; 103)

Note: Standard errors in parantheses *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

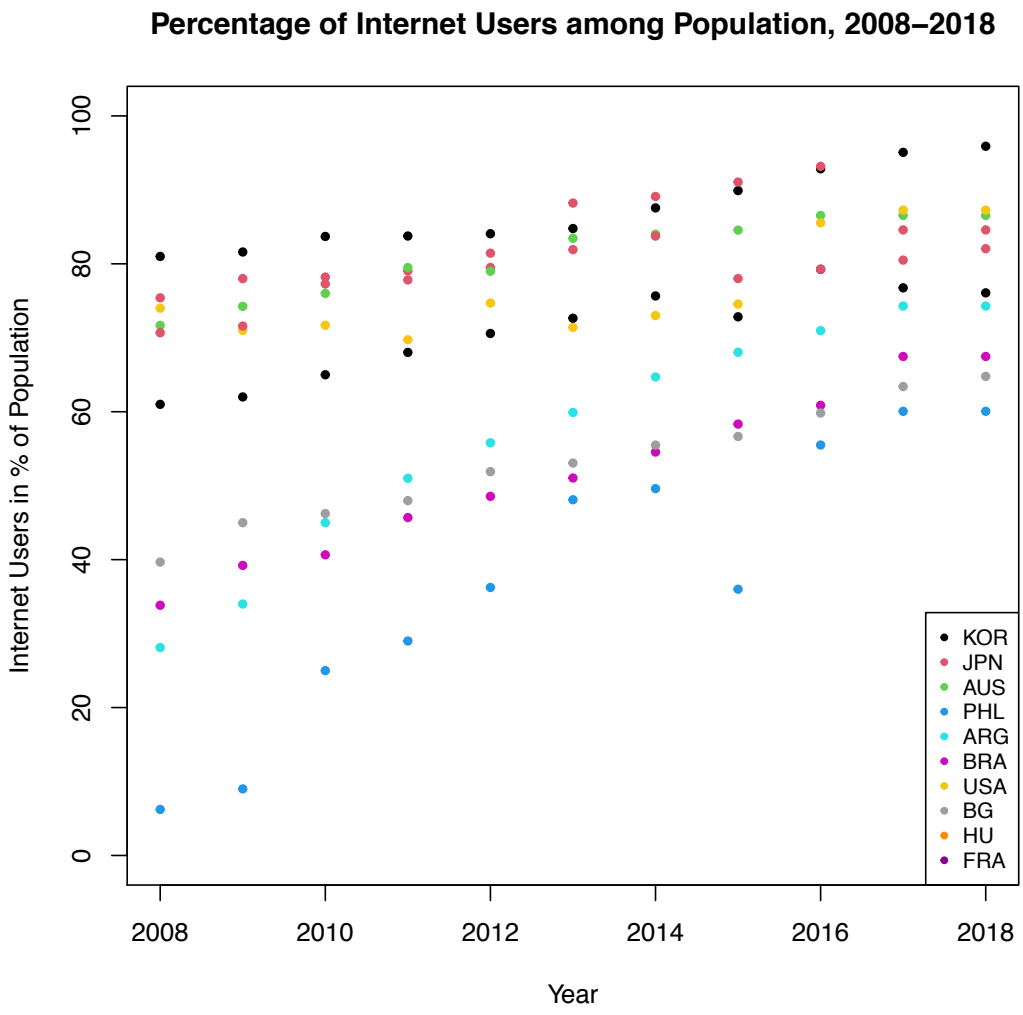

Figure 1: Internet Users as % of Population, 2008-2018

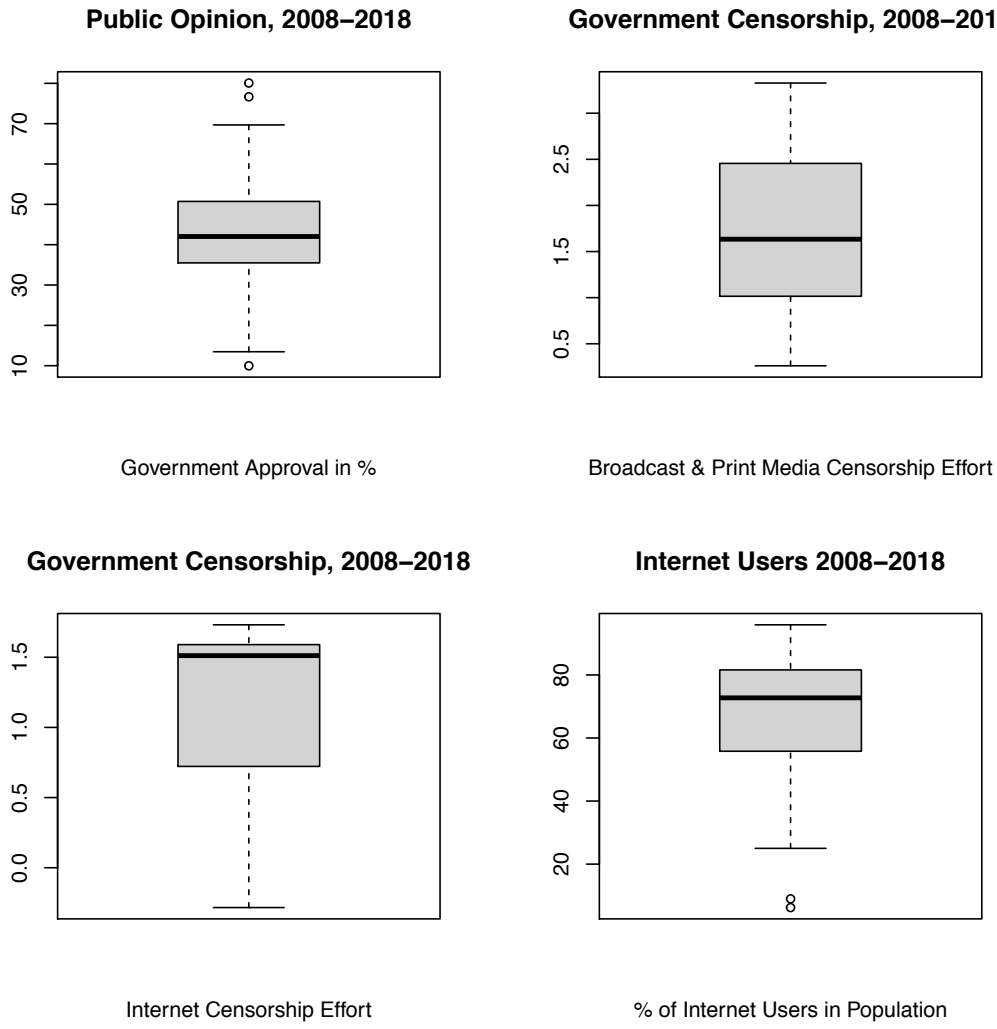

Figure 2: Distribution of DV and main IVs

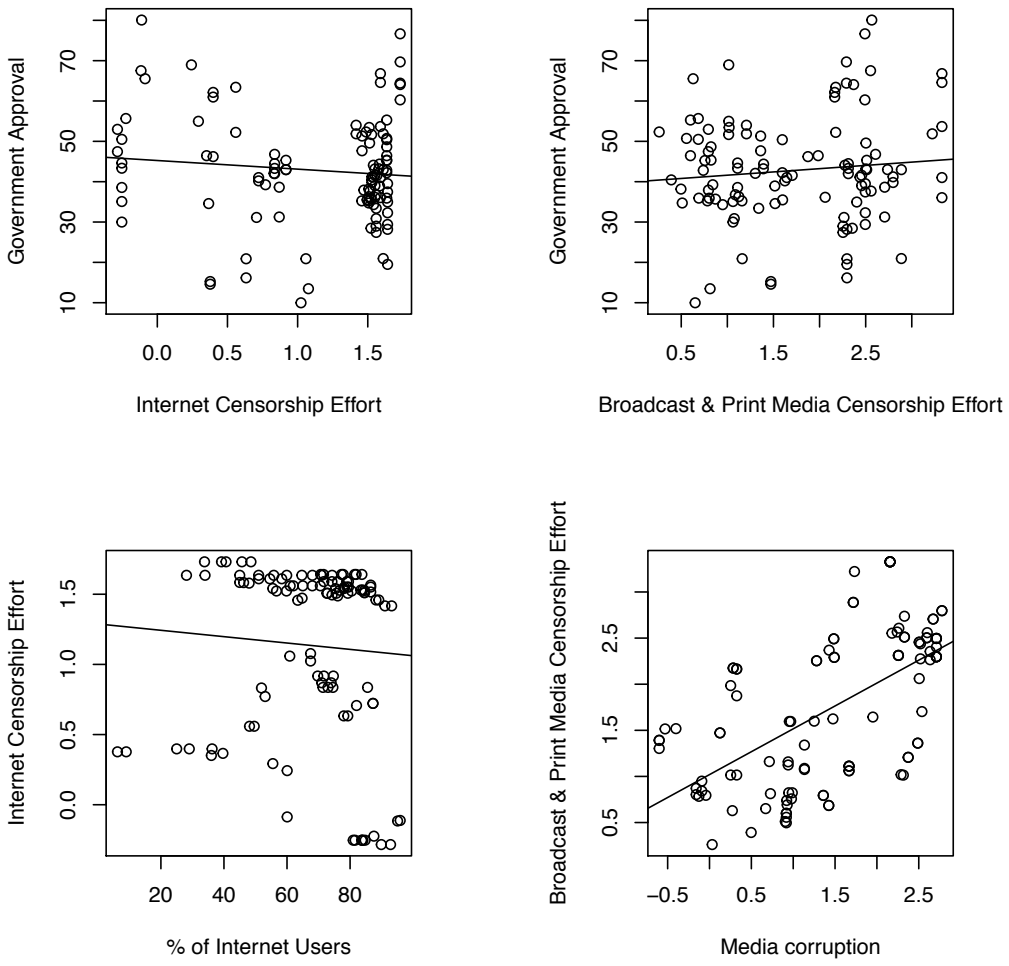

Figure 3: Simple Regressions Between DV, IVs and Controls

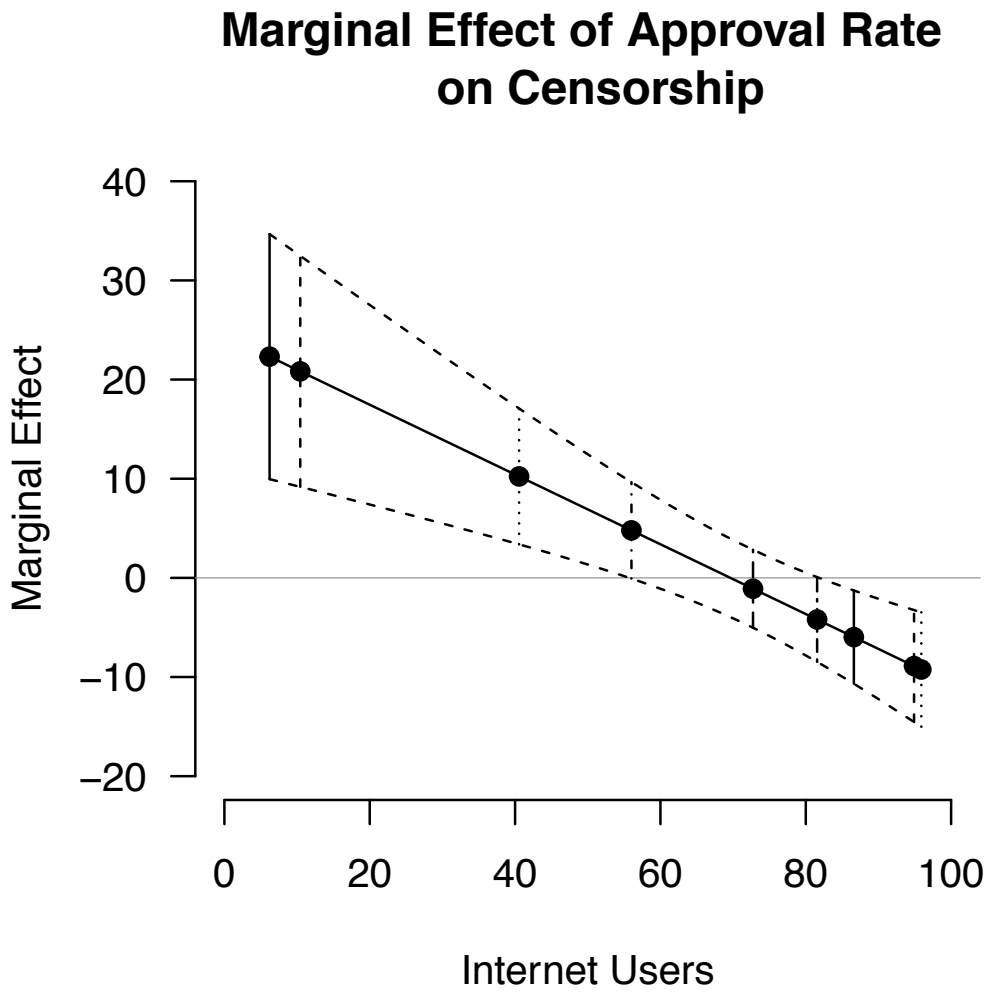

Figure 4: Marginal Effect of Internet Censorship on Approval with Confidence Interval

11 STATUTORY DECLARATION

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