

# Unbundling Autocracy: Exposure to Evaluation Tools for Political Engagement in Backsliding Democracies

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March 19, 2025

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  - ▶ to pay attention to individual policies in the bundle.
  - ▶ to access to critical opinions.
  - ▶ to evaluate policy bundle holistically.
  - ▶ to maintain political interest and exhibit engagement.
- ▶ As a result, it decreases political activism and resistance to incumbents' autocratic ambitions.

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## Two-step experimental strategy:

1. Long-run online field experiment (Newsletter subscription)
2. Short-run online survey experiment (**Today's presentation**)

# Omnibus Legislation: Strategic Issue Bundling

**Definition:** Embedding autocratic reforms within popular policy packages.

- ▶ Economic stimulus tied to judicial weakening.
- ▶ Security laws bundled with procurement favors.
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**Challenge to Comprehend the Disadvantages:**

- ▶ **Structural Limitations:** Biased media coverage.
- ▶ **Cognitive Limitations:** Voters with limited attentions.

## Real-World Examples of Issue Bundling

- ▶ **Venezuela:** Social programs + Executive power expansion.
- ▶ **Russia:** Pension reforms + Extended presidential term limits.
- ▶ **Turkey:** Security reforms + Presidential system shift.
- ▶ **Hungary:** Family benefits + Judicial control.
- ▶ **United States:** Tax cuts + Budget deficit increases.
- ▶ **Poland:** Welfare expansion + Media control.
- ▶ **Mexico:** Social programs + Military control.
- ▶ **Brazil:** COVID aid + Executive overreach.

# Theoretical and Experimental Intervention

**Theoretical Intervention:** A shock in learning and evaluation strategies.

- ▶ Breaks down policy bundles to reduce cognitive overload.
- ▶ Accounts for different weights of received information.
- ▶ Introduces a systematic approach to evaluating policy bundles.

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**Proposed Intervention:** Exposure to evaluation tools and strategies to mitigate cognitive overload and show how to assess bundles.

- ▶ Uses existing information.
- ▶ Breaks down policy bundles and highlights advantages and disadvantages with equal weights.

# Hypotheses

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## **Mechanism Hypotheses:**

**H4:** *Larger bundles make people less interested and engaged.*

**H5:** *Intervention is more effective when bundles are larger.*

**H6:** *Intervention increases internal efficacy.*

**H7:** *Intervention increases demand for costly information acquisition.*

**H8:** *Intervention increases attention to policy issue details.*

## **2×2 Factorial Design with Partial Factorial Randomization of Encouragement**



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- ▶ Participants randomly assigned to **four treatment arms**, manipulating:
  1. **Evaluation tools:** With vs. without access to evaluation tools.
  2. **Bundle size:** Large-bundle (7 issues) vs. Small-bundle (3 issues).

## 2×2 Factorial Design with Partial Factorial Randomization of Encouragement

- ▶ Participants randomly assigned to **four treatment arms**, manipulating:
  1. **Evaluation tools:** With vs. without access to evaluation tools.
  2. **Bundle size:** Large-bundle (7 issues) vs. Small-bundle (3 issues).
  
- ▶ Within each treatment arm, two additional factors are **randomized in a stratified manner**:
  1. **Tool Access Compliance:** Encouraged vs. Demand-driven (randomized within each "With Access" treatment × bundle size group).
  2. **Information Cost:** High cost vs. Low Cost (randomized within each treatment × bundle size group).

## Experimental Conditions and Randomization Scheme

Group	Treatment	Bundle Size	Tool Access Compliance	Information Cost
Group 1	With Evaluation Tools	Large Bundle	50% Encouraged 50% Demand-Driven	50% Low Cost 50% High Cost
Group 2	With Evaluation Tools	Small Bundle	50% Encouraged 50% Demand-Driven	50% Low Cost 50% High Cost
Group 3	Without Evaluation Tools	Large Bundle		50% Low Cost 50% High Cost
Group 4	Without Evaluation Tools	Small Bundle		50% Low Cost 50% High Cost

# Survey Flow

- 1) Participants take the **pre-treatment survey**.
- 2) Participants are assigned to their **treatment-arms**.
- 3) Participants take the first module in **an abstract workplace setting**.
  - ▶ Treatment groups have access to evaluation tools.
  - ▶ To avoid the political salience affecting the results.
- 4) Then participants take the second module in **an abstract political setting**.
  - ▶ No one has access to evaluation tools.
  - ▶ We capture whether
    - ▶ people learn the tools they were exposed (learning hypotheses).
    - ▶ people apply these tools in a political setting (external validity).

## Survey Flow: Abstract Workplace Setting

1. Participants are introduced to a **gamified decision-making setup** in a hypothetical workplace.
2. They receive a **bundled policy proposal** from their employers (large bundle vs. small bundle).
3. The treatment groups receive **access to evaluation tools** that introduce the framework (encouragement vs. demand-based).
4. Participants can **request additional policy evaluations** as many times as they want.
  - ▶ Information from **their employer is free** (representing the biased mainstream media).
  - ▶ Information from **an independent consultant at a cost** (high cost vs. low cost).
5. Participants respond to **opinion and feeling questions**.
6. Participants are offered **an option to costly request status-quo** with probability 0.5.
7. The **payoffs** are realized.

## Survey Flow: Abstract Political Setting

1. Same setup as the political setting.
2. No one has access to policy evaluation tools.
3. At the end, participants are offered **some additional resources on the subject** (time-costly)
  - ▶ on demand.
  - ▶ with tracking on the url.

# Variable Operationalization

## Outcome Measures

### ▶ (Political) Interest

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## Mediator Measures

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- ▶ **Survey:** Confidence measures.
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- ▶ **Behavioral:** the times of additional information requested (free and costly).

### ▶ Attention

- ▶ **Behavioral:** incentivized memory retrieval from issues.

# Treatment Operationalization

Please rank the following policies in order of perceived benefit, placing the most beneficial ones at the top and the least beneficial ones at the bottom.

1	Policy 4 - Information about Policy
2	Policy 3 - Information about Policy
3	Policy 6 - Information about Policy
4	Policy 1 - Information about Policy
5	Policy 7 - Information about Policy
6	Policy 2 - Information about Policy
7	Policy 5 - Information about Policy



**Figure:** Evaluation Tool: Step 1 - Ranking

## Treatment Operationalization

Please answer the questions below:

[illegible]

Figure: Evaluation Tool: Step 2 - Evaluating

# Empirical Models: H1 and H2 (Reduced Form)

**H1: Intervention increases interest.**

**H2: Intervention increases costly participation.**

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + X_i\Theta + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where:

- ▶  $Y_i$  = Political interest (H1) or costly participation (H2)
- ▶  $T_i$  = Treatment assignment (access to evaluation tools)
- ▶  $X_i$  = Control variables (e.g., demographics, baseline interest)
- ▶  $\epsilon_i$  = Error term
- ▶ data come from the workplace module
- ▶ Intent-to-Treat (ITT)

### Instrumental Variable: Encouraged Treatment as Instrument

$$T_i = \alpha + \pi_1 Z_i + X_i \Theta + \nu_i \quad (2)$$

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \hat{T}_i + X_i \Theta + \epsilon_i \quad (3)$$

where:

- ▶  $Z_i$  = Randomized encouragement instrument (e.g., exposure to incentive for using tools)
- ▶  $\hat{T}_i$  = Predicted treatment from first-stage regression on actual use of the evaluation tools
- ▶ data come from the workplace module
- ▶ Causal Effect of Treatment-on-the-Treated (ATT)

## Empirical Model: H3A (Learning Policy Evaluation Skills)

**H3A:** *Intervention fosters learning policy evaluation.*

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i + X_i \Gamma + \epsilon_i \quad (4)$$

where:

- ▶  $Y_i$  = Political interest (H1) or costly participation (H2)
- ▶  $T_i$  = Treatment assignment (access to evaluation tools)
- ▶  $X_i$  = Control variables (e.g., demographics, baseline interest)
- ▶  $\epsilon_i$  = Error term
- ▶ data come from the Politics module



## Empirical Model: H3B (Applying of Policy Evaluation Skills)

**H3B:** *Intervention fosters application of policy evaluation skills.*

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 P_i + \beta_3 (T_i \times P_i) + X_i \Theta + \delta_t + \epsilon_{i,t} \quad (5)$$

where:

- ▶  $Y_{i,t}$  = Outcome variable (e.g., political interest (H1) or costly participation (H2))
- ▶  $T_i$  = Treatment assignment (access to evaluation tools)
- ▶  $P_i$  = Workplace vs. Political setting indicator
- ▶  $T_i \times P_i$  = Difference-in-Differences (DiD) interaction term
- ▶  $X_i$  = Control variables (e.g., demographics, baseline interest)
- ▶  $\delta_t$  = Time fixed effects (if panel data)
- ▶  $\epsilon_{i,t}$  = Error term
- ▶ Data come from both workplace and political modules

# Placebo Checks and Robustness Tests

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- ▶ **Attention Manipulation Check:** To validate participants' attention.
- ▶ **Manipulation Comprehension Check:** Ask participants *"how fair did this polity seem?"* after the final costly engagement.

# Placebo Checks and Robustness Tests

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- ▶ **Placebo Checks:** At the end, offer unrelated culinary resources.
- ▶ **Attention Manipulation Check:** To validate participants' attention.
- ▶ **Manipulation Comprehension Check:** Ask participants *"how fair did this polity seem?"* after the final costly engagement.
- ▶ **Reading Time & Response Latency:** Track reading time and time spent reading treatment narratives answering issue detail questions.

