

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

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March 19, 2025

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- ▶ This incumbent strategy makes it harder
 - ▶ 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.
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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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Main Hypotheses:

H1: *Intervention increases interest.*

H2: *Intervention increases costly participation.*

H3: *Intervention fosters learning and application of policy evaluation skills.*

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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.*

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- ▶ Participants randomly assigned to **four treatment arms**, manipulating:
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 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

- ▶ **Behavioral:** Click-through rate on additional free and costly information in the workplace and political settings.

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Mediator Measures

▶ Internal efficacy

- ▶ **Survey:** Confidence measures.
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▶ 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)
- ▶ ϵ_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)
- ▶ ϵ_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)
- ▶ δ_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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- ▶ **Reading Time & Response Latency:** Track reading time and time spent reading treatment narratives answering issue detail questions.

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- ▶ **Reading Time & Response Latency:** Track reading time and time spent reading treatment narratives answering issue detail questions.
- ▶ **Experimenter Demand Effects Check:** Randomize framing of the experiment as either a *reading comprehension study* or a *policy evaluation study* to check for bias.