THE POPULARITY OF AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS:
A Cross-National Investigation

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ABSTRACT

How do citizens in authoritarian states feel about their leaders? While some dictators rule through terror, others seem genuinely popular. Using the Gallup World Poll's panel of more than one hundred-forty countries in 2006–2016, the authors show that the drivers of political approval differ across regime types. Although brutal repression in overt dictatorships could cause respondents to falsify their preferences, in milder informational autocracies, greater repression actually predicts lower approval. In autocracies as in democracies, economic performance matters and citizens' economic perceptions, while not perfectly accurate, track objective indicators. Dictators also benefit from greater perceived public safety, but the authors find no such effect in democracies. Covert censorship of the media and the Internet is associated with higher approval in autocracies—in particular, in informational ones—but ratings fall when citizens recognize censorship. In informational autocracies, executive elections trigger a ratings surge if there is leader turnover, but, unlike in democracies, reelected autocrats enjoy little honeymoon.