

Laudatio Rokkan Prize 2017

The 2017 Stein Rokkan Prize for Comparative Social Science Research has been awarded to Abel Escribà-Folch and Joseph Wright in recognition of their book *Foreign Pressure and the Politics of Autocratic Survival*, published by Oxford University Press in 2015. Their book asks two main, closely connected questions: In what ways and to what extent can external actors, through the selective use of coercive foreign policy instruments, destabilize autocratic regimes? And how likely is it that policies aimed at destabilization will lead to a democratic transition rather than the replacement of one autocracy by another? Escribà-Folch and Wright provide exceptionally insightful answers to these questions in a book that is a masterly example of comparative scholarship. They seek to develop a “unified theory of regime change in dictatorships” that links the use of foreign policy instruments to the calculations of autocratic rulers as they seek to stay in power and ponder the costs of losing power. Empirical expectations are tested on the basis of a broad array of quantitative and qualitative observations relating to dictatorships since 1946 and the foreign policy tools employed to destabilize them. Escribà-Folch and Wright tackle questions that are of major political significance; their research is empirically impressive, theoretically sophisticated, conceptually rich, and methodologically convincing; and they succeed in presenting their answers in a lucid and compelling manner. As such, their book constitutes a “very substantial and original contribution in comparative social science research”, as stipulated as the main criterion for the award of the Stein Rokkan Prize.

Foreign Pressure and the Politics of Autocratic Survival identifies five main instruments by which foreign powers may seek to influence the chances of survival of autocratic rulers, including foreign aid linked to conditionality; economic sanctions; “naming and shaming”; human rights prosecutions; and military interventions. All five are, to a greater or lesser extent, coercive in nature and, as such, constitute the exercise of “hard power” rather than “soft power”. Economic coercion includes aid conditionality that makes aid dependent on political liberalization; and economic sanctions that restrict trade or impede financial exchanges. Diplomatic, political and judicial coercion comprises both efforts to publicize and condemn human rights violations and prosecutions and indictments aimed at punishing human rights violations. Finally, “hostile military interventions involve the realized threat of violent coercion using military forces to enter the target country’s territory”.

How likely is it that the use of these coercive instruments leads to regime change and, in particular, to a democratic transition? Escribà-Folch and Wright argue that the answer to this question lies in how foreign pressure, conceptualized as “external shocks”, affects the calculations of domestic actors, including both autocratic rulers and oppositional forces. First, “coercive policy instruments can alter the expected utility of rebelling for the opposition”. For example, foreign pressure may undermine “the regime’s ability to deliver rents” to its supporters, and thus increase “the probability of a rebel’s victorious ouster of the regime”. Second, foreign coercion can alter the expected utility of seeking to hold on to power for autocratic rulers. In particular, if “faced with an increased likelihood of being punished, rulers unable to obtain credible domestic or foreign protection” can be expected “to become more inclined to fight for survival. In contrast, other instruments, like conditional aid, offer incentives to step down by rewarding regime change”.

As Escribà-Folch and Wright highlight, the effects of foreign pressure will be systematically affected by the nature of the autocratic regime, i.e., whether it is based on personalist, dominant party or military rule. This distinction matters, since the three autocratic regime types “differ in the strategies their rulers use to remain in power, in the consequences of losing power for elites and, thus, in the way they tend to collapse”. The decision-theoretic model of regime

change developed by Escribà-Folch and Wright, thus, seeks to explain the conditions under which foreign coercion is likely to contribute to regime collapse and, critically, whether regime collapse leads to democratization or the transition to another authoritarian regime. The authors skillfully weave together quantitative and qualitative evidence to probe the conditions under which foreign pressure may further democratization and employ both cross-national empirical tests and case studies intended to “provide a chain of evidence aimed at establishing construct validity” and to “probe the internal validity of the argument and the proposed causal mechanisms”.

The findings of their study make somber reading. Throughout, they stress that “foreign pressure is only likely to destabilize dictatorships under a relatively narrow set of conditions” and may, in fact, help to entrench them. And even when destabilization is achieved, “this does not guarantee that ousting the regime will bring about democracy. Rather, in many cases, the incumbent regime is likely to be replaced by another dictatorship.” In particular, of the three types of autocracies they distinguish, personalist regimes “are the least likely to democratize after regime collapse”, a finding all the more troubling “in light of the fact that personalist rule is fast becoming the most common type of autocracy”.

Escribà-Folch and Wright have written a book that exemplifies the academic virtues that the Stein Rokkan Prize is intended to honor. It asks big questions and it gives bold answers that are informed by rich empirical information, analyzed with conceptual, theoretical and methodological flair and rigor. If, as many argue, autocracies are on the rise and democracies in retreat, this book helps to explain why; but it also provides perhaps surprisingly practical insights into what can be done to contain and push back autocracies.

The members of the Stein Rokkan Prize Committee taking part in the final deliberations on the 2017 prize winner – Dorothee Bohle, Klaus H. Goetz, Alberto Martinelli, and Per Selle – were unanimous in their decision.