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## Extremism in revolutionary movements

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## ABSTRACT

A revolutionary entrepreneur strategically chooses the revolutionary agenda to maximize the likelihood of revolution. Citizens have different preferences and can contribute varying degrees of support. We show: (1) Extremists exert a disproportionate influence over the revolutionary agenda; (2) Depending on the structure of repression, more severe repression can moderate or radicalize the revolutionary agenda. Specifically, increases in the “minimum punishment” (marginal cost of revolutionary effort at its minimum) radicalize the revolutionary agenda. This presents the elite with a tradeoff between extreme but unlikely revolutions and moderate but likely ones. (3) Competition between revolutionary entrepreneurs can radicalize the revolutionary agenda.

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## 1. Introduction

Revolutionary movements vary in terms of the extent of the change they demand: Some are more extreme than others. During the 1979 Iranian Revolution, people were demanding a radical change that would involve a new constitution and a major restructuring of political, social, and economic institutions of Iran. Thirty years later, when election officials announced Ahmadinezhad's victory in the 2009 Iranian presidential election, protests broke out throughout the country. However, the protesters had a much more moderate demand: They wanted a fair election between Mousavi and Ahmadinezhad because they believed Mousavi would have won if it was not for election fraud. In France, the 1830 Revolution was much more moderate than the 1848 Revolution. While the 1848 Revolution ended monarchy and established the Second Republic, “the change of men was probably the most revolutionary aspect of the [1830] revolution” (Pinkney, 1973, p. 276). It caused “no fundamental shift in the seat of power and resulted in no mandate for such change” (p. 367).

What determines the extremism of the revolutionary agenda?<sup>1</sup> The literature has largely focused on coordination and free-riding issues that arise in revolutions and protests, ignoring the endogenous choice of the revolutionary agenda. We develop a simple model in which the revolutionary agenda is determined by revolutionary entrepreneurs in their interactions with citizens and the state. Our main contribution is to identify three factors that influence the extremism of the revolutionary agenda: (1) Citizens with extreme preferences exert a disproportionate influence over the revolutionary agenda;

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<sup>1</sup> Revolutionary agenda refers to the policies and programs that the revolution seeks to implement. A revolutionary agenda is more extreme if it seeks a larger change from the status quo. Precisely, we define extremism as the distance between the status quo policy and the revolutionary agenda—using Euclidean metric in a one-dimensional policy space. This “ideological extremism” is distinct from “tactical extremism,” which refers to the use of violent tactics.

- (2) Depending on the structure of state repression, higher repression can moderate or radicalize the revolutionary agenda;  
 (3) Competition between two revolutionary entrepreneurs can radicalize the revolutionary agenda.

In addition to endogenizing the revolutionary agenda, we depart from the theoretical literature by allowing citizens to exert a continuum of effort toward changing the status quo.<sup>2</sup> This “dissent gradation,” when combined with citizens’ heterogeneous preferences, generates a tradeoff for the revolutionary entrepreneur who chooses the revolutionary agenda.<sup>3</sup> A more radical agenda is supported by fewer citizens, but the extremists who do support it exert more effort towards its success. That is, the revolutionary entrepreneur’s choice of revolutionary agenda features a tradeoff between the extensive and intensive margins of support.<sup>4</sup>

This framework provides new insights into the interactions between repression and extremism in revolutionary movements. We show that the structure of punishments for citizens’ revolutionary efforts, which we refer to as *repression structure*, influences the extremism of the revolutionary agenda. Expected punishments for dissent increase with the level of anti-regime activities. For example, punishments for attending a peaceful protest are typically less than those for organizing a demonstration, which, in turn, are less than punishments meted out for armed struggle. But in many countries, a citizen who is arrested even for very low levels of anti-regime activities incurs significant costs. For example, she may remain in custody for weeks until her case is processed, or she may be denied important opportunities such as higher-education just because her name has become associated with dissenting activities—no matter how small. Sometimes, these punishments are very severe. For example, many protesters who were arrested during and after the 2009 Iranian presidential election were tortured and raped. As the 2013 report of the UK-based *Freedom from Torture* (2013) organization documents, some of these protesters had “no personal history of political or other activism, or family profile of dissent, prior to the 2009 presidential election period” (p. 13), and “were arrested and detained for attendance at demonstrations alone” (p. 14). We introduce the notion of *minimum punishment* to refer to the expected costs that a citizen incurs for committing a minimal level of anti-regime activities—we formulate minimum punishment as the expected marginal cost of revolutionary effort at the minimum level of revolutionary effort. As one expects, higher levels of repression lower the likelihood of a successful revolution. However, increases in the minimum punishment have an additional strategic consequence: Higher minimum punishments make the revolutionary agenda more extreme.<sup>5</sup>

The intuition for why higher minimum punishments lead to radicalism is strategic. Because even very small levels of support are subject to the minimum punishment, citizens whose support is already at a minimal level cannot further lower their support level to reduce the adverse effects of increases in the minimum punishment on their payoffs. Therefore, increases in the minimum punishment cause the most moderate supporters of the revolution to withdraw their support. The revolutionary entrepreneur can respond in two ways: He can either moderate his revolutionary agenda to win back the moderates and partially recover the loss in the extensive margin of support, or he can make it more extreme to elicit more support from the extreme citizens along the intensive margin of support. The moderates’ contributions are small anyway because they do not gain as much from a successful revolution.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the revolutionary entrepreneur strategically radicalizes the agenda to generate higher levels of support from the extremists. That is, higher minimum punishments decrease the likelihood that revolutions succeed, but make successful ones more extreme. This resonates with *Della Porta’s* (2013)

<sup>2</sup> The literature typically models revolutionary activities as a costly binary choice in which citizens decide whether or not to participate in the revolution (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2001, 2006; Angeletos et al., 2007; Boix and Svolik, 2013; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2014; Bueno de Mesquita, 2010, 2013; Buénrostro et al., 2007; Casper and Tyson, 2014, 2015; Chamley, 1999; Chen et al., 2014; Chen and Xu, 2014, 2015; DeNardo, 1985; Edmond, 2013; Egorov and Sonin, 2015; Egorov et al., 2009; Ellis and Fender, 2011; Epstein et al., 2012; Fearon, 2011; Gehlbach, 2013; Ginkel and Smith, 1999; Hollyer et al., 2013; Leventoglu, 2005; Loeper et al., 2014; Little et al., 2013; Lohmann, 1994; Meirowitz and Tucker, 2013; Persson and Tabellini, 2009; Rubin, 2014; Shadmehr, 2014; Shadmehr and Bernhardt, 2011, 2014, 2015; Shadmehr and Boleslavsky, 2015; Tyson and Smith, 2014). However, the empirical and qualitative literature emphasizes that dissent comes in different intensities, and dissidents exhibit varying degrees of support for a revolutionary movement. For example, in the El Salvadoran civil war, some individuals participated in strikes and demonstrations, while others risked severe punishment by smuggling food and water to the guerrillas through army posts. Some contributed their silence: “We used to help them [the guerrillas] by telling the military, ‘No, haven’t seen anyone’” (Wood, 2003, p. 126). Others informed the rebels about the movement of government forces. Of course, there were also those who took up arms, but even they put in various degrees of effort. As a regional commander of the Revolutionary Army of the People has told Wood (2003, p. 124): “there were various levels of militia participation. Some might be mobilized for activities for two, three, or five days—they would participate and then return to their homes. Others would join us for two weeks or a month.” El Salvador is not an exception. Studying Lithuanian resistance to German and Soviet occupation, Petersen (2001) documents varying degrees of resistance from “lower-risk, one-shot actions such as graffiti writing, singing anti-regime songs on a bus, or showing up for demonstrations” to armed fighters (p. 23–24). Summarizing the literature, Kalyvas (2006, 100) argues that “support is not dichotomous but can be conceptualized as a continuum.”

<sup>3</sup> The notion of “revolutionary entrepreneur” resonates with the notions of “professional revolutionaries” (as popularized by the Lenin’s treatise *What is to be Done?*), “social movement brokers,” and “entrepreneurs of violence” in social movements literature (Della Porta, 1995, p. 108, 195–201; Diani, 2003; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007, p. 29–31), and has been used in formal models (Bueno de Mesquita, 2010; Roemer, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> The extensive margin of support refers to the (expected) number of supporters, and intensive margin of support refers to the intensity of their support. We use support, effort, and anti-regime activities interchangeably. We emphasize that radicalizing the revolutionary agenda also reduces the efforts of some of the remaining supporters, so that the revolutionary entrepreneur also faces a tradeoff just along the intensive margin of support.

<sup>5</sup> Not all increases in repression radicalize the revolutionary agenda. For example, suppose the expected marginal cost of revolutionary effort,  $e$ , is  $\alpha + \beta e^\eta$ , with  $\beta, \eta > 0$ , so that  $\alpha$  is the minimum punishment. We show that increases in  $\alpha$  radicalize the revolutionary agenda, but increases in  $\eta$  moderate it, while increases in  $\beta$  do not affect the revolutionary agenda.

<sup>6</sup> Because our model assumes quadratic utilities, the extremists’ gains are higher than the moderates’. However, our results extend even when the utility function is the absolute value function, so that it’s not strictly concave. In the Extensions, we consider the case where a citizen can also support the regime.

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