

Electoral Responsiveness in Closed Autocracies: Evidence from Petitions in the former German Democratic Republic

HANS LUEDERS *Stanford University, United States*

Contested elections are usually seen as precondition for constituent responsiveness. By contrast, I show that even uncontested elections can create incentives for autocratic regimes to address citizen demands. I propose that closed autocracies engage in cycles of responsiveness before uncontested elections to assure citizens of their competence and raise popular support. They do so to mitigate the short-term destabilizing effects of elections. Analyzing a unique dataset of petitions to the government of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), I calculate that response times to petitions were up to 31% shorter before the GDR's uncontested elections. Moreover, I introduce the concept of "substantive responsiveness," which focuses on the material consequences of responsiveness for petitioners, and show that petitions were 64% more likely to be successful. The paper advances our understanding of electoral mobilization in closed regimes and contributes to an emerging research agenda on responsiveness and accountability in autocracies.


Competitive multiparty elections are a hallmark of democratic governance. Because they incentivize office-seeking incumbents to represent and cater to their constituents' interests, they establish an "electoral connection" between citizen demands and political outcomes (Mayhew 1987). Consequently, the presence of free and fair elections is widely regarded as the single most important characteristic of democratic governance and therefore lies at the core of most modern definitions of democracy (Dahl 1971; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; Schumpeter 1950).

Accordingly, contestation is often seen as a precondition for responsiveness and accountability (Powell 2004; Shmuel 2020). Extant scholarship hence agrees that only some authoritarian elections are able to generate responsiveness. While even in autocracies competition between multiple candidates can lead them to invest heavily in the provision of services to their constituents (Blaydes 2011; Lust-Okar 2006; 2008; Magaloni 2006), it is scholarly consensus that autocratic elections do not incentivize political elites to respond to their constituents if these elections are uncontested (Brender and Drazen 2005; Pepinsky 2007; Shmuel 2020; Veiga, Veiga, and Morozumi 2017).

This paper challenges this conventional understanding of authoritarian elections. The focus is on uncontested elections in "closed autocracies,"¹ where the only choice voters have is whether or not to support the regime's handpicked candidates. I demonstrate that, despite this lack of contestation, uncontested elections can still generate an "electoral connection" between voters and the government.

I propose that governments in closed regimes improve responsiveness to citizen demands before uncontested elections in an effort to raise popular support. High popular support reduces the risk of elite challengers or opposition mobilization at a time when autocratic regimes are vulnerable. It also enables elections to perform their informational and signaling functions (Bahry and Sliver 1990; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Magaloni 2006; Malesky and Schuler 2011). Responsiveness to citizen grievances is a useful tool for increasing popular support because it demonstrates the regime's competence (Gorgulu, Sharafutdinova, and Steinbuks 2020), increases subjective political efficacy (Dipoppa and Grossman 2020; Sjöberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017), and raises trust in the government (Chapman 2021; Truex 2017).

Evidence for cycles of responsiveness around uncontested elections comes from an analysis of the petition system of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Like other closed regimes—such as the Soviet Union (Dimitrov 2014a), Iraq (Walter 2018), China (Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Luehrmann 2003), or Saudi Arabia (Pan 2020, 166)—the East German socialist regime encouraged citizens to report their grievances directly to the government. East Germans made extensive use of this system. They wrote between half (Class, Kohler, and Krawietz 2018) and one million (Mühlberg 2004) petitions every year, equaling up to 8.1% of the country's electorate. As the breadth of topics covered in these petitions demonstrates, they were not unlike 311 calls² (Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020), pothole complaints (Burnett and Kogan 2016), or "FixMyStreet" requests (Dipoppa and Grossman 2020; Sjöberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017) in democracies. And, just like in democracies, petitions were answered faster before elections.

Hans Lueders , Postdoctoral Scholar, Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford University, United States, hlueders@stanford.edu.

Received: March 10, 2021; revised: August 12, 2021; accepted: November 09, 2021. First published online: December 23, 2021.

¹ Closed autocracies impose tight restrictions on political and civil rights: there is no political competition and no freedom of speech, association, and assembly (Schedler 2006).

² 311 calls refer to the telephone number 3-1-1, which provides residents in many communities in the United States and Canada with access to local services.

Analyzing a unique dataset of petitions submitted to the central government of the GDR between 1978 and 1990, I show that average response time was 22% to 31% shorter in the three months before elections, decreasing the time between receipt and response by more than one week. Petitions were also more likely to be successful before elections. The probability of success increased by up to 9.1 percentage points, which represents a 63.6% increase relative to an average success rate of 14.3%. This result expands existing conceptualizations of responsiveness. Past work usually asks if and under what conditions citizens receive a response from government officials but does not consider the material consequences of such responsiveness (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020; Dipoppa and Grossman 2020; Distelhorst and Hou 2014; 2017). I instead introduce the concept of “substantive responsiveness” and show that improved responsiveness to citizen demands before the GDR’s uncontested elections also led to tangible improvements in citizens’ livelihoods. To further support this conclusion, data on government expenditures show that government spending increased more strongly before elections on two key social policy issues: housing and price stability.

To explain these results, I demonstrate that the regime was especially responsive to petitions that directly questioned the regime’s competence. Moreover, I show that the main driver of improved preelectoral responsiveness was the central government; petitions answered by central government officials saw a particularly strong decrease in response time before elections.

I rule out several alternative explanations. First, I show that my results are not driven by differences in petition volume or topic. There is little evidence that East Germans submitted more or different petitions before elections or that the regime strategically selected petitions it could answer easily. Second, the results cannot be explained by bureaucratic turnover: petitions were answered more quickly before both local and national elections. Third, there is no evidence that government officials attempted to artificially deflate response times before elections: there is no effect of elections on the number of days between the dates petitions were written and received.

My work makes multiple contributions to scholarship on responsiveness in closed regimes (Manion 2015; Truex 2016). The finding that even uncontested elections can incentivize government responsiveness calls into question existing assumptions about the unresponsiveness of closed autocracies and the absence of electoral business cycles in these regimes (e.g., Brender and Drazen 2005; Pepinsky 2007; Powell 2004; Shmuel 2020; Veiga, Veiga, and Morozumi 2017). It also expands past work on responsiveness in closed regimes, which usually considers nonelectoral incentives, such as informal institutions (Tsai 2007), political connections (Tsai and Xu 2018), coethnicity (Distelhorst and Hou 2014), threats to contact upper-level officials (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016), threats of collective action (Distelhorst and Hou 2017), or leadership succession

during party congresses (Bunce 1980; Tao 2006; Tsai 2016). I further add to this literature by introducing the distinction between “performative” and “substantive” responsiveness. Last, I emphasize that responsiveness can be driven by the central government. This identifies a little-acknowledged driver of responsiveness, as the existing literature usually explains responsiveness with *local* bureaucrats’ desire to be promoted (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Jee 2021), win local elections (Martinez-Bravo et al. 2020), or preserve their social standing (Tsai 2007).

ELECTORAL RESPONSIVENESS IN CLOSED AUTOCRACIES

Uncontested Elections in Closed Regimes

Most autocracies today conduct regular elections for national office. Elections are also routinely held in closed regimes, where they often take the form of referenda: the only choice voters have is whether or not to support the government’s handpicked candidates. Such *uncontested elections* are carefully orchestrated mass events. Widespread voter mobilization and intimidation, coupled with electoral manipulation, ensure a result that bolsters the government’s claim that it enjoys undivided popular support: regimes ranging from Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam today to Cambodia, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Romania, or South Yemen in the past have routinely reported that they achieved near-unanimous support on election day (Table 1).

These election results are certainly exaggerated. However, I propose that closed regimes still seek to secure genuine citizen support—by which I mean that citizens turn out and vote for the regime party, irrespective of whether they do so in compliance with the regime’s expectations or for ideological reasons—in an effort to counteract two election-related threats to their survival. The first reason why autocratic regimes seek to secure genuine citizen support is that such high popular support counteracts the destabilizing effects of elections. Elections are focal points for opposition coordination, which raises the probability of autocratic breakdown (Knutsen, Nygård, and Wig 2017). A worse-than-expected result tells citizens that support for the government is lower than it claims (Cheibub and Hays 2015; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010), which can encourage dissatisfied citizens to join an opposition movement (Kuran 1991). At the same time, elections can motivate citizens to participate in various forms of collective action, further raising the probability of antiregime mobilization (Baldwin and Mvukiyehe 2015; Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2015). Elections pose additional risks because they offer opportunities for splits in the ruling coalition, especially when voters are dissatisfied with the government (Magaloni 2006).

The second reason is that elections rely on strong popular support to perform their core functions (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Geddes, Wright, and

TABLE 1. Parliamentary Election Results in Select Closed Autocracies

Country	Regime Party/Electoral Alliance	Year	Turnout (%)	Vote share (%)
Cuba	Committees for the Defense of the Revolution	2018	85.65	94.42
Laos	Lao Front for National Construction	2016	97.94	unknown
North Korea	Democratic Front for the Reunification of Korea	2019	99.99	unknown
Vietnam	Vietnamese Fatherland Front	2016	99.35	unknown
Benin	People's Revolutionary Party of Benin	1984	93.15	98.10
Cambodia	National United Front of Kampuchea	1976	98.00	unknown
Cape Verde	African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde	1985	68.80	94.00
Guinea	Democratic Party of Guinea—African Democratic Rally	1980	95.69	99.80
Madagascar	National Front for the Defense of the Revolution	1989	74.60	97.29
Romania	Front of Democracy and Socialist Unity	1985	99.90	97.73
South Yemen	Yemeni Socialist Party	1978	91.27	99.87

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2020).

Frantz 2018). Even uncontested elections provide the dictator with information about public support (Zaslavsky and Brym 1978), as abstention or a vote against the regime are usually seen as dissent (Bahry and Silver 1990; Karklings 1986). They further allow the regime to monitor local officials and learn about their ability to mobilize voters in their jurisdiction, which can influence promotion decisions (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Guo 2009; Malesky and Schuler 2011; 2013). Last, successful electoral mobilization demonstrates the regime's capacity to control the population. This signal of invincibility deters challengers (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Magaloni 2006; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Simpser 2013).

To achieve such high electoral support, dictators cannot rely on fraud alone. Citizens are not completely in the dark about the true level of regime support; they know their own vote choice and may have some idea about how their peers feel toward the regime. This limits the regime's ability to falsify the results in a credible way (Simpser 2013). If the result is too far off from reality, allegations of a "stolen election" can facilitate revolutionary collective action (Kuntz and Thompson 2009; Tucker 2007), as evidenced by the postelection protests following systematic fraud in the 1989 local elections in the GDR. Moreover, an entirely fabricated election result provides the government with little information about regime opposition or the competence of local officials.

Dictators cannot rely solely on coercion either to achieve their preferred election outcome. Forcing the population to vote for the government again undermines the ability of elections to perform their functions because it leaves dictators uncertain about their true level of support (Wintrobe 1998). Moreover, recent research has shown that repression before elections can increase the risk of backlash and popular protest afterwards (Esberg 2021; Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski 2016). For example, the GDR regime employed so-called degradation measures (*Zersetzungsmaßnahmen*) to make life harder for opponents. Yet, evidence suggests that these measures might have increased opposition to the socialist regime (Pingel-Schliemann 2009).

Electoral Cycles of Responsiveness to Citizen Petitions

I propose instead that even closed regimes seek to generate genuine popular support. To do so, they improve responsiveness to citizen demands in the lead-up to elections. By responsiveness, I mean that the government takes action in response to the preferences of its constituents (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999).

Many authoritarian regimes channel citizen demands through petition systems. Petition systems offer citizens a legal avenue through which they can report their grievances to the government. Petitions help solve the "dictator's dilemma," whereby the dictator cannot be certain whether the population supports them out of fear or conviction (Wintrobe 1998): on the one hand, petitions serve as "barometer of public opinion" (Dimitrov 2014b). They are similar to 311 calls (Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020), pothole complaints (Burnett and Kogan 2016), or "FixMyStreet" requests (Dipoppa and Grossman 2020; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017) in democracies in that they draw the government's attention to citizens' everyday grievances. In the aggregate, they generate important information about the public mood and help the government identify and address causes of citizen dissatisfaction early (Dimitrov 2017). As such, petitions are a way for the autocratic regime to manage opposition quietly: the regime uses the information contained in petitions to identify and address grievances as they arise and before they encourage open protest. Petitions are better suited to collecting information about ordinary citizen grievances than government surveillance. Using the state security apparatus to collect the same information would require surveillance of virtually the entire population—a task that even the GDR's *Stasi*, arguably one of the world's most effective and largest secret police forces, was unable to accomplish (Pfaff 2001; Popplewell 1992).

On the other hand, petitions are an ideal mechanism for raising public support. By responding to and resolving petitions, the autocratic government can prove that it cares about its citizens' problems and demonstrate its *competence*.

Responsiveness to petitions can take two forms. Extant scholarship on responsiveness to citizen requests in both democracies and autocracies usually asks if and under what conditions citizens receive a response (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020; Dipoppa and Grossman 2020; Distelhorst and Hou 2014; 2017). Yet, it usually remains unknown whether such a response simply acknowledges or actually resolves the issue—that is, whether the response is “performative” or “substantive.”

“Performative responsiveness” is symbolic. It is characterized by “the state’s theatrical deployment of visual, verbal, and gestural symbols to foster an impression of good governance before an audience of citizens” (Ding 2020, 5–6). Although the government responds to citizens’ concerns, it does not resolve them. By contrast, “substantive responsiveness” means that the government responds *and* resolves the issue. Here, a petition results in tangible improvements in the petitioner’s livelihoods. To the best of my knowledge, I am one of the first to study both forms of responsiveness empirically and explicitly consider substantive responsiveness in my analysis.

Both forms of responsiveness can improve regime support. As Truex (2017) shows, even performative responsiveness can increase popular trust and regime satisfaction, especially in contexts where citizens’ expectations about political access are low. This is because it gives citizens the impression that they have a voice in politics and are more than “being relegated to mere bystanders in the political discourse” (Chapman 2021, 1461). Moreover, it can improve citizens’ subjective political efficacy, making them more likely to engage with the government in the future (Dipoppa and Grossman 2020; Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017). Substantive responsiveness, in turn, raises support by directly addressing citizens’ grievances. Because petitions contain everyday grievances, they reveal citizens’ expectations about what the government ought to deliver. Actually delivering on these expectations raises government approval (Gorgulu, Sharafutdinova, and Steinbuks 2020), an effect augmented by the resulting tangible improvements in citizens’ livelihoods (Cho, Lee, and Song 2019; Dickson et al. 2016; Guriev and Treisman 2020). Moreover, substantive responsiveness reassures citizens of the regime’s ability to meet their demands and reminds them of the social bargain many authoritarian governments strike with their citizens (Cook and Dimitrov 2017): the government delivers socioeconomic progress in return for popular acquiescence (Dale 2005).

Local and central government officials alike have incentives to improve responsiveness before elections. Local officials need popular support to deliver the best possible election outcome in their jurisdiction. Here, local officials improve responsiveness to demonstrate their competence *to the central government* in an effort to advance their careers (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Jee 2021). The central government, in turn, needs strong support to discourage political challengers and ensure a turnout rate high

enough for elections to perform their functions. Here, the central government improves responsiveness to demonstrate its competence *to voters* in an effort to ensure political survival.

Discussion

In sum, I propose that uncontested elections offer powerful incentives for both local and central government officials to improve responsiveness to citizen demands before elections. Improved responsiveness can increase regime support by assuring voters of the regime’s competence and ability to deliver on citizens’ expectations. The implication is that even uncontested elections can generate an “electoral connection” (Mayhew 1987).³

This argument builds on extant scholarship on political cycles in autocratic regimes in two ways. On the one hand, I expand past work on budget cycles in closed autocracies surrounding party congresses. Tao (2006) and Tsai (2016), for instance, document nationally coordinated budget cycles around the quinquennial National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, while Bunce (1980) presents evidence of budget cycles around communist party congresses in the Soviet Union and other East European communist regimes. However, the crucial difference between party congresses and uncontested elections in closed regimes is that the latter were unrelated to leadership succession. As such, responsiveness around elections was not intended to build popular support for a new leader but instead to secure high citizen support in an electoral ritual that had little effect on the country’s political leadership.⁴

On the other hand, I expand past work on electoral cycles by showing that electoral cycles are not confined to regimes with contested elections. Scholars of electoral cycles tend to believe that electoral cycles do not exist in authoritarian regimes that hold uncontested elections (Brender and Drazen 2005; Shmuel 2020; Veiga, Veiga, and Morozumi 2017). For instance, Block, Ferree, and Singh (2003, 447) argue that “in a world with no uncertainty, the models predict no [electoral] cycles.” Similarly, “in dictatorships where elections are merely a show of force [...] this model should not apply” (Pepinsky 2007, 141). However, there is little evidence that electoral cycles are indeed absent in closed autocracies. Case studies of authoritarian electoral cycles usually focus on hegemonic or competitive regimes—such as Egypt (Blaydes 2011), Malaysia (Pepinsky 2007), Mexico (Gonzalez 2002; Magaloni

³ State capacity arguably facilitates the regime’s ability to shore up popular support before elections through improved responsiveness to citizen demands. However, my argument is not restricted to countries with strong state capacity. Petition systems are also routinely employed by regimes with relatively weak state capacity, as the case of Iraq under Saddam Hussein illustrates (Walter 2018).

⁴ In the Appendix, I show that responsiveness to citizen petitions did not vary around the GDR’s party congresses. This finding suggests that the regime employed distinct strategies before elections and party congresses to secure citizen support.

TABLE 2. Elections in the GDR

Date	Type	Turnout (%)	Share yes (%)
May 20, 1979	Local councils	98.28	99.82
June 14, 1981	People's Chamber	99.21	99.86
May 6, 1984	Local councils	99.37	99.88
June 8, 1986	People's Chamber	99.73	99.94
May 7, 1989	Local councils	98.77	98.85

Note: Official election results, taken from the archives of the *Neues Deutschland* newspaper. Accessed August 13, 2020. <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/archiv>.

2006), or Russia (Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya 2004)—while cross-country analyses routinely omit uncontested elections altogether (Brender and Drazen 2005; Veiga, Veiga, and Morozumi 2017).

ELECTIONS AND PETITIONS IN SOCIALIST EAST GERMANY

Elections

Evidence for my argument comes from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The GDR conducted quintennial elections for the country's legislature—the *People's Chamber* (*Volkskammer*)—and, nonconcurrently, for local councils. Candidates in each multimember electoral district were selected by the regime and represented the ruling *Socialist Unity Party of Germany* (SED), affiliated (“block”) parties, and mass organizations. All candidates were part of the same electoral list: the *National Front*. As such, GDR elections were emblematic of uncontested elections. Voters' only choice was whether to support or oppose the *National Front*. Elections in the GDR thus stand out as even less competitive than in other closed regimes—such as Cuba (Fonseca Galvis and Superti 2019), Vietnam (Malesky and Schuler 2010; 2013), or China (Manion 2015; Shi 1999)—where voters can choose between several regime-aligned candidates. According to the above-referenced models of electoral cycles, we should thus expect no electoral cycles in the GDR.

A vote in favor of the *National Front* was done in public by folding and depositing the ballot in the ballot box. To vote against the *National Front*, voters had to strike through every single name on the ballot. Because this act required voters to enter a voting booth—typically placed in the farthest corner of the room—poll workers took immediate notice (Wolle 1998). This and other forms of intimidation effectively deterred most voting against the government (Karklings 1986; Wittenburg 2018).

The East German government spent enormous resources on voter mobilization. The period before elections saw an increased supply of consumer goods to create the illusion of social progress (Wittenburg 2018). On election day, all government and many apartment buildings displayed flags and propaganda posters. The first voters to cast ballots, as well as first-time voters, were greeted with flowers while the Young

Pioneers entertained voters with socialist workers' and battle songs (Ansorg 1993). Poll workers kept meticulous records of individual turnout and sent hourly updates to the central election committee. During the final voting hours, poll workers paid in-person visits to citizens who had not voted yet (bpb 2019; Wolle 1998). Mobile ballot boxes allowed the sick and elderly to vote at home or in hospitals (Der Spiegel 1990).

According to official records, the GDR government always claimed to have achieved quasi-unanimous support. Reported turnout and votes for the *National Front* usually exceeded 98% (Table 2). These results were publicly announced across all media, along with a characterization as “overwhelming proof of trust in our socialist state” (1979 elections) or “impressive commitment to our politics of peace and socialism” (1989).⁵ Of course, the true result was unlikely as unanimous. But evidence of some fraud notwithstanding (bpb 2019), scholarly consensus holds that both turnout and support for the *National Front* was very high (Karklings 1986; Weber and Florath 2019). I propose that improved responsiveness to citizen petitions was one way the regime achieved such high support.

Petitions

Article 103 of the GDR's Constitution gave every citizen the right to submit petitions (*Eingaben*) to any branch and level of government. East Germans made extensive use of this system. They submitted between half (Class, Kohler, and Krawietz 2018) and one million (Mühlberg 2004) petitions every year, equaling up to 8.1% of the East German electorate. Given that most petitions were written on behalf of households or neighborhood associations, the true share of the population writing a petition was even higher. Improved preelectoral responsiveness was thus a widely applicable strategy.

Petitions provided the government with invaluable information about everyday popular grievances.⁶ They contained information about local supply shortages, public grievances about insufficient government

⁵ Headlines from the *Neues Deutschland* national newspaper. Accessed August 13, 2020. <https://www.nd-archiv>.

⁶ This section draws on original archival fieldwork in Germany, during which I reviewed numerous internal documents and petition files. See the Appendix for details on the files consulted.

service delivery, and overall sentiment toward the socialist government (Dimitrov 2017). The vast majority of petitions sought to achieve an improvement in the petitioner's living conditions from within the institutional framework (Stadt 1996). My archival research identified only a handful of petitions that openly called for regime change. Accordingly, there is little evidence that citizens faced repercussions for submitting petitions. In fact, as Dimitrov (2014a) argues, the socialist government faced strong incentives not to punish petitioners. Any punishment would have lowered citizen trust and prevented citizens from submitting petitions in the future, thus depriving the regime of the information it sought to collect.

Government agencies created detailed reports about petition volume and content by county and year (Stadt 1996).⁷ The information contained in these reports often informed policy making, as best illustrated by the coffee crisis in the mid-1970s: in an effort to stem a coffee supply shortage, the government had decided to dilute ground coffee with pea flower. Public outcry about the resulting poor coffee quality was so overwhelming that the regime quickly reversed this decision (Mühlberg 2004).

Petitions were often successful and improved petitioners' living conditions, an insight that informs my analysis of substantive responsiveness below. There are numerous examples of petitioners' obtaining better housing,⁸ a new job,⁹ or access to college education or vocational training,¹⁰ among many others.

Petitions further allowed the government to monitor local officials (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016). Many petitions included a direct criticism of local decisions or a lack of responsiveness.¹¹ The central government's follow-ups with local authorities often confirmed citizens' critiques and led to revisions of prior decisions.¹²

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data

The analysis draws on a unique dataset of more than 70,000 petitions submitted to the central government of

the former GDR between 1974 and 1990 (see Lueders 2021 for data and replication files). There are two samples. The first one comprises 10,892 petitions to the *People's Chamber* (*Volkskammer*), the country's legislature, between 1974 and 1989. I created it by manually reviewing all available *People's Chamber* petition files at the German Federal Archives in Berlin.¹³ As most petitions were forwarded to other agencies, the original petition text is often unavailable. But each file contains a summary card with basic information (see Figure 1 for an example). Using these cards, for each petition I manually recorded data on the date it was (1) written, (2) received, and (3) answered, as well as data on (4) the location of the petitioner (zip code, city, county, and district), (5) their gender (coded based on their first name), (6) a brief summary of the content, and (7) a chronological input number. The sample comprises almost all petitions sent to the *People's Chamber* surrounding the 1979, 1981, and 1984 elections, which defines the period of analysis for this sample.¹⁴

Almost all petitions received a response. These responses could take two forms. Some responses did not resolve the issue but instead acknowledged petitioners' concerns or explained why the government was unable to help. Successful petitions, in turn, gave petitioners access to the requested government service or even led to a change in government policy. Information on success is available for 1977 to 1984, when summary cards included a handwritten note that an issue was "resolved positively" (*positive Erledigung*). This information offers me a unique opportunity to research substantive responsiveness in the GDR. The share of successful petitions in my sample is 14.3%, ranging from close to 0% (domestic or foreign affairs) to 30% (housing) (Figure 2a). The true success rate was likely even higher, as not all petitions asked for government action. Thus, the success rate in my sample matches that reported in other contexts. Fitzpatrick (2005, 177), for instance, finds that between 15% and 30% of petitions in the USSR received a response.

The second sample comprises 60,491 petitions to the *Council of Ministers* (*Ministerrat*)—the ministerial cabinet—between July 1988 and October 1990. They come from an electronic database created by *Council of Ministers* staff. To the best of my knowledge, this sample contains the universe of all petitions submitted during that period.

Figure 2b depicts the distribution of topics for both samples. It emphasizes the breadth of issues covered.¹⁵

⁷ E.g., see annual reports on petitions to the *State Council* in 1964–1967 (BArch DE 2/43626), 1985 (BArch DA 5/11419), 1986 (BArch DA 5/11421), 1987 (BArch DA 5/11423), or 1988 (BArch DA 5/11425).

⁸ E.g., *People's Chamber* petitions 715/1977 (BArch DA 1/16905), 200/1980 (BArch DA 1/19173), 26/1981 (BArch DA 1/15938), 557/1982 (BArch DA 1/14847). See also BArch DA 5/10906, BArch DA 5/11026, BArch DA 11432.

⁹ E.g., *People's Chamber* petitions 618/1978 (BArch DA 1/16900), 298/1982 (BArch DA 1/14878), 813/1982 (BArch DA 1/14899). See also BArch DA 5/11436.

¹⁰ E.g., *People's Chamber* petitions 242/1978 (BArch DA 1/16911), 318/1978 (BArch DA 1/16900), 668/1978 (BArch DA 1/16909), 938/1982 (BArch DA 1/14865).

¹¹ E.g., *People's Chamber* petitions 15/1974 (BArch DA 1/15925), 1215/1977 (BArch DA 1/16912), 116/1978 (BArch DA 1/16895), 571/1981 (BArch DA 1/15943), 460/1983 (BArch DA 1/14917), 1515/1987 (BArch DA 1/16387), 266/1988 (BArch DA 1/16388).

¹² E.g., BArch DA 5/10913, BArch DA 5/10926, BArch DA 5/11072, BArch DA 5/11079.

¹³ See the Appendix for the archival signatures of the 282 boxes consulted.

¹⁴ To compute the share of *People's Chamber* petitions collected, I divided the total number of petitions collected each year by the highest input number (see the Appendix for details). Coverage in the period of analysis ranges from 81% (1984) to 98% (1980). The exception is 1985, for which only few petitions were available. As shown in the Appendix, my findings remain unchanged when this year is dropped.

¹⁵ I used the content summaries of each *People's Chamber* petition to manually code its topic. Some of the differences in the topic distributions are likely due to the different periods covered: the continuing deterioration of the housing stock coupled with rising demand for exit

FIGURE 1. Sample Petition to the *People's Chamber*

Date received 14.4.77 (Datum)	Input number 452 (E-Nummer)	(Sachgebiet)	Dresden District (Bezirk)	T.:
			Bautzen County (Kreis)	T.:
(Name)	Last name		5.4.77 an Date written	T.:
(Vorname)	First name		Erhödigungsvermerk: Zentrales Schreibzimmer	T.:
86 Bautzen (Postleitzahl) (Wohnort)	zip code and city		4.5.77 Date answered	
(Straße)	Address			
Auswertung	- Ablehnung der Freikörperkultur Brief description of content A			

Source: *People's Chamber* petition Nr. 452/1977 (BArch DA 1/16893).

Note: Example summary card of a *People's Chamber* petition. It was received on April 14, 1977, from the city of Bautzen and contains a complaint about nudist beaches on the Baltic Sea coast.

An examination of the content of petitions shows that the vast majority of petitions were about everyday citizen grievances. The main topics were housing (e.g., complaints about poor living conditions or requests for better apartments); justice (e.g., requests for legal assistance or advice); and labor, wages, or social insurance (e.g., requests for a better job, inquiries about pay raises, or questions about welfare eligibility). Other petitions included requests for renovations, automobiles, or phone lines; complaints about neighbors, supply shortages, or pollution; questions about school curricula or the GDR's relations with other countries; or suggestions about public policy changes, among many others. That is, petitions resemble what Harris and Hern (2019) call "valence protests" in African countries: citizen attempts to change government action but not the government itself. By and large, petitions demanded competence from the government. As such, petitions were not unlike citizen requests or complaints in democracies, which draw political attention to ordinary issues and ask officials for help in access to basic services.

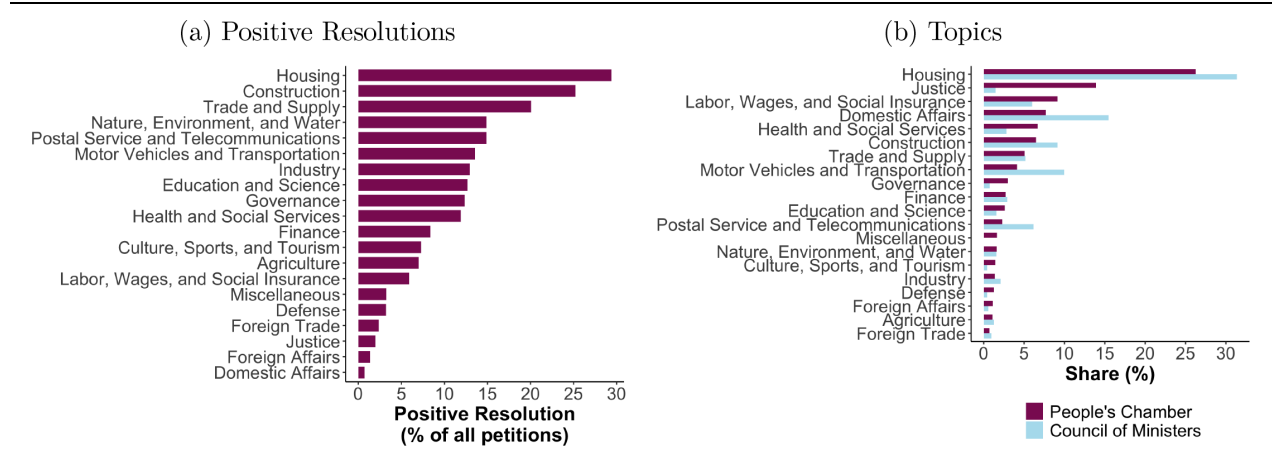
The *Council of Ministers* data contain three additional variables (see the Appendix for details). The first variable codes the petition's *reference*, which I use below as additional control variable. This information is only available for about one third of petitions. Most petitions referred to a specific law (21%), followed by elections (8%), and decisions made at the local level

visas may explain why these issues are more prominent in the *Council of Ministers* sample. It is also plausible that citizens, aware of the different competences of the *People's Chamber* and the *Council of Ministers*, were strategic about the recipient of their petition.

(2%), the *Council of Ministers* (1%), or the politburo (0.2%). The second variable codes information about *who answered* the petition: 27% of petitions were answered by the central government, and the remaining petitions were forwarded to county (22%), district (14%), or municipal governments (14%), or companies (6%). I use this variable below to test for differences in preelectoral responsiveness across levels of government.

The third variable codes the petition's *character*. Of particular interest are the 38% of petitions that were critical of the government. These critical petitions contained either a criticism of a government decision (*Kritik an Entscheidungen*) or the functioning of the government more broadly (*Kritik an der Arbeitsweise*). Critical petitions accused the government of not observing a previous commitment or failing to respond altogether. For example, some claimed that a local government did not provide better housing despite the petitioner's eligibility, whereas others criticized inefficient resource allocation, excessive wait times for cars, or discrimination in the job search process. In critical petitions, the government's failure to live up to its promises was framed as an infringement upon core socialist principles. Importantly, critical petitions rarely contained an open critique of the socialist system itself. In fact, my fieldwork identified only a handful of petitions that called for regime change. This finding points to an important limitation to the petition system: the government could only respond to and address its citizens' grievances as long as they remained within the institutional framework provided by the regime itself; petitions were not a mechanism for citizens to have their systemic opposition heard.

FIGURE 2. Distribution of Positive Resolutions and Topics



Note: Left panel: share of successful *People's Chamber* petitions by topic. Data restricted to 1978–1983. Right panel: distribution of topics (in % of all petitions) by petition sample. Data restricted to the three months before and after elections.

Below, I use the distinction between critical and other petitions to provide evidence that the regime used preelectoral responsiveness to assure citizens of its competence. Critical petitions directly questioned the regime's ability to deliver material well-being to its citizens. I thus expect the government to respond particularly quickly to these petitions in order to prevent disillusionment among the population. That internal reports about petition content and volume routinely mentioned the number of critical petitions underscores the regime's attention to these petitions.

Figure 3 reports the monthly volume of petitions to the *People's Chamber*: the number of (a) incoming petitions, (b) responses, and (c) the difference between both (the corresponding Figure for *Council of Ministers* petitions is reported in the Appendix). The data provide some evidence that the volume of both incoming petitions and government responses was higher around elections. Citizens may write more petitions either because election proximity raises the salience of the government or because they strategically time their petitioning. Increased incoming petition volume may allow the government to select petitions it could answer quickly before elections. If true, these concerns may make petitions submitted before elections less comparable to those submitted in other periods. However, as discussed in more detail below, I find few qualitative differences in incoming petitions or government responses over time.

Empirical Strategy

The empirical analysis considers two outcomes. The first one is the natural logarithm of 1 plus the number of days between the date a petition was received and answered ("response time").¹⁶ This variable was top-coded at the 99th percentile. It is the standard measure of responsiveness to citizen requests used in existing research (Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020; Dipoppa and

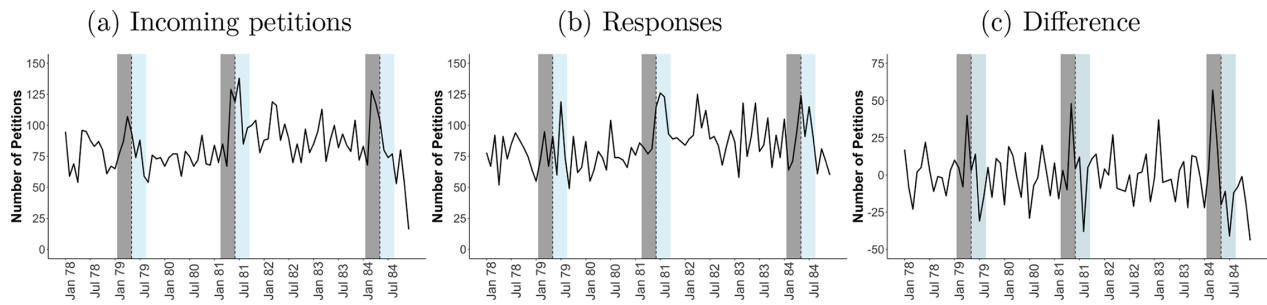
Grossman 2020). However, as discussed above, it does not allow me to distinguish between performative and substantive responsiveness. To measure the latter, I use a dichotomous indicator of whether a petition was successful ("positive resolution"; *People's Chamber* sample only). I expect response time to be shorter before elections, whereas the probability of success should be higher.

I test this expectation in two ways. As the *People's Chamber* petitions are available for election and nonelection years, they allow for a difference-in-differences design that exploits temporal variation before vs. after elections and between election vs. nonelection years. To do so, each election was matched with the same period in the two adjacent, nonelection years ("pseudo-election"), with pseudo-election dates in nonelection years corresponding to the actual election date in election years. I estimate the following equation using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression:

$$y_{icdy} = \alpha_1 pre_{dy} + \alpha_2 pre_{dy} \times election\ year_y + \phi_d + \delta_y + \mu_c + \varepsilon_{icdy} \quad (1)$$

Here, y_{icdy} denotes response time or success of petition i submitted from county or zip code area c and answered on day d in year y . Values for pre_{dy} indicate whether day d in year y is before or after a (pseudo-) election, and $election\ year_y$ indicates election years. All models include fixed effects for day d (ϕ_d), year y (δ_y), and county or zip code c (μ_c). Standard errors are clustered by county or zip code, respectively. In one model, I additionally cluster standard errors by month-year (i.e., unique combination of month and year). Of interest is the coefficient on the interaction term (α_2). It

¹⁶ I add one day to prevent petitions with a same-day response from being dropped when log transforming this variable. I show in the Appendix that this transformation does not influence the results.

FIGURE 3. People's Chamber Petition Volume over Time

Note: Monthly number of (a) incoming *People's Chamber* petitions, (b) responses to petitions, and (c) the difference between both. Gray and light blue mark the 90 days before and after elections.

reflects how the difference in the outcome between the pre- and postelection periods changes between election and nonelection years.

Council of Ministers petitions are unavailable for the corresponding pseudo-election periods. I thus estimate a simpler model:

$$y_{icd} = \beta_1 \text{pre}_d + \mu_c + \varepsilon_{icd}. \quad (2)$$

In Equation 2, y_{icd} is the response time for petition i submitted from county or zip code area c and answered on day d and pre_d indicates whether day d is before or after the election. The coefficient of interest is β_1 , which represents the difference in average response times between the pre- and postelection periods. All models include fixed effects for county or zip code (μ_c). Standard errors are clustered accordingly.

Response time may be a function of the number of petitions awaiting response (“pending petitions”). Increasing backlog may constrain the government’s ability to respond to petitions in a timely manner, while low petition volume may make responses easier. All models therefore control for the number of pending petitions each day.¹⁷

Data availability restricts the analysis to four elections. The *People's Chamber* petitions are analyzed around the local elections on May 20, 1979, and May 6, 1984, and the legislative elections on June 14, 1981. The *Council of Ministers* data are available for the local elections on May 7, 1989. I consider the 90 days before and after each (pseudo-)election.¹⁸

My empirical strategy relies on three identifying assumptions (see the Appendix for evidence). First, I assume that the timing of elections is unrelated to responsiveness. This assumption is plausible because the elections considered here were held at the end of their regular five-year terms. Second, difference-in-differences designs assume no spillovers. There are no differences in response time between election and nonelection years

during the postelection period: the fact that responsiveness changed before elections did not affect responsiveness thereafter. There are also no differences in responsiveness between the pseudo-pre- and pseudo-postelection periods in nonelection years. Third, I assume parallel trends: election and nonelection years should move in parallel outside of elections. I substantiate this assumption by showing that there were no differences in response times when considering petitions answered outside the 180-day window around elections.¹⁹

RESULTS

Shorter Response Times before Elections

Figure 4 visualizes average response times before (gray) and after (light blue) elections using survival analysis. Each point reports the share of petitions with a response time of at least as many days as indicated on the horizontal axis. The curve for the preelection period is consistently below that for the postelection period; as hypothesized, petitions were answered more quickly before elections.

Table 3 probes this conclusion. Models 1 through 4 analyze the *People's Chamber* petitions using Equation 1. Models 5 and 6 analyze the *Council of Ministers* petitions using Equation 2. All models control for the number of pending petitions. Models 1 through 4 include day- and year-fixed effects. I add county-fixed effects to Models 1, 3, 4, and 5 and zip code-fixed effects to Models 2 and 6. Standard errors are clustered accordingly. The exception is Model 4, which clusters standard errors by county and month-year.

The estimated difference in response times is negative, statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, and substantively similar across all models, both samples, and both estimation strategies. It implies that response time was between 23.3% (Model 5)²⁰ and 30.6% (Model 2)²¹

¹⁷ I show in the Appendix that there is little evidence that my findings are driven by the inclusion of this control, which might introduce posttreatment bias.

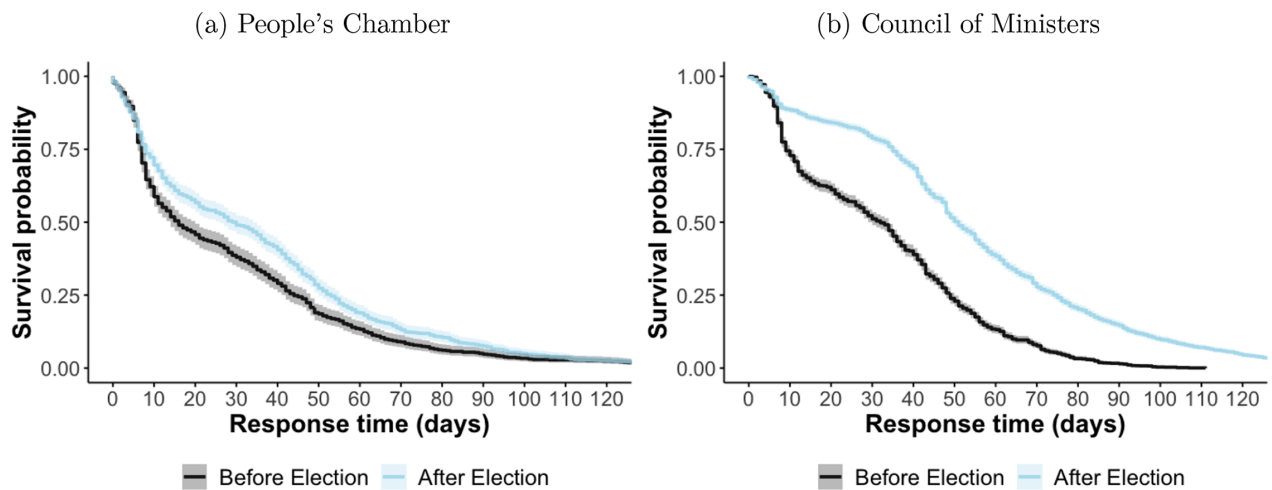
¹⁸ I show in the Appendix that all results are robust when using alternative time windows.

¹⁹ The Appendix reports summary statistics for all variables used in the analysis.

²⁰ $100 \times (e^{-0.265} - 1)$.

²¹ $100 \times (e^{-0.366} - 1)$.

FIGURE 4. Response Times before and after Elections: Kaplan–Meier Estimates



Note: Distribution of response times (in days) for *People's Chamber* (left) and *Council of Ministers* petitions (right) for the three months before (gray) and after (light blue) elections. Estimated using survival analysis. Each point reports the share of petitions with a response time of at least as many days as indicated on the horizontal axis.

TABLE 3. Petitions Were Answered Faster before Elections

	Response time (log days)					
	People's Chamber				Council of Ministers	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preelection	0.193* (0.101)	0.165 (0.160)	0.153 (0.107)	0.193*** (0.073)	-0.265*** (0.033)	-0.282*** (0.039)
Preelection × Election year	-0.314*** (0.094)	-0.366*** (0.115)	-0.296*** (0.098)	-0.314*** (0.097)		
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
County-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
ZIP code-FE?		✓				✓
County × year?			✓			
SE clustered by	county	zip code	county	county & month-year	county	zip code
Observations	3,737	3,732	3,737	3,737	4,770	4,770
Adjusted R ²	0.090	0.087	0.089	0.090	0.166	0.140

Note: Difference in response time to *People's Chamber* (Models 1 to 4) and *Council of Ministers* (Models 5 to 6) petitions between the pre- and postelection periods. Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

shorter before elections. Outside the 180 days around elections, the mean (median) response time to a *People's Chamber* or *Council of Ministers* petition was 37.39 (23) and 38.51 (32) days, respectively. It follows that responsiveness improved by between 8.7 (37.39×0.233) and 11.8 days (38.51×0.306) relative to the mean, or between 5.4 (23×0.233) and 9.8 days (32×0.306) relative to the median.²²

These effects exceed those documented in democracies. Christensen and Ejdemyr (2020, 469), for instance, find that response times to 311 calls in San Francisco and New York decrease by about four days as elections approach. Responsiveness to “FixMyStreet” requests in the United Kingdom, in turn, improves by about 11%, or six days, before elections (Dipoppa and Grossman 2020, 15–6).

Evidence on Substantive Responsiveness

Past scholarship on responsiveness to citizen requests usually focuses exclusively on whether and when

²² I show in the Appendix that count models (Poisson and negative binomial) yield very similar results.

TABLE 4. Petitions Were More Likely to Be Successful before Elections

	Positive resolution					
	all petitions				housing	other
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preelection	-0.011 (0.067)	-0.120 (0.104)	-0.026 (0.069)	-0.011 (0.063)	0.048 (0.209)	0.033 (0.071)
Preelection × Election year	0.077* (0.044)	0.090 (0.058)	0.091** (0.046)	0.077** (0.032)	0.240** (0.105)	0.047 (0.047)
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Zip code-FE?		✓				
County × year?			✓			
SE clustered by	county	zip code	county	county & month-year	county	county
Observations	2,625	2,621	2,625	2,625	852	1,773
Adjusted R ²	0.029	0.072	0.059	0.029	0.021	0.039

Note: Difference in the probability that a *People's Chamber* petition was successful between the pre- and postelection periods. Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

citizens receive a response. My data offer me a unique opportunity to move beyond the conventional focus on response times and additionally ask whether improved responsiveness to petitions before elections led to tangible improvements in petitioners' livelihoods.

To do so, Table 4 explores whether the probability that a *People's Chamber* petition was successful (i.e., positive resolution) varied around elections. Models 1 through 4 mirror those in Table 3. The coefficient of interest is positive across all four models (albeit insignificant in Model 2), implying that petitions were more likely to be successful before elections. I compute that the probability of success increased by between 7.7 (Models 1 and 4) and 9.1 percentage points (Model 3), or up to 63.6% relative to the mean (14.3%) of this variable (0.091 / 0.143).

Increased success rates were a costly signal of regime competence. I show this by distinguishing between petitions about housing and petitions about other topics. Due to the scarcity of housing, resolving housing petitions was costly. Still, the effect of elections on positive resolutions is concentrated among these petitions (Model 5), whereas there is no difference in success rates for all other petitions (Model 6).

In sum, I find that improved responsiveness to citizen petitions before the GDR's uncontested elections was more than lip service. The preelection period saw not only a decrease in average response times but also an increase in the probability that petitioners were successful. I thus conclude that preelectoral responsiveness was substantive.

Figure 5 supports this conclusion further. It plots the annual increase in government expenditures on two primary social policy issues: housing and price stability (source: Staatliche Zentralverwaltung für Statistik 1989). Expenditures on these two categories increased particularly strongly in election years (indicated by

vertical dotted lines), which implies that the GDR regime strategically spent more resources on citizen concerns before elections. As shown in the Appendix, I calculate that expenditures on housing increased by an additional 6.1 percentage points, whereas expenditures on price stability rose by an additional 12.1 points.

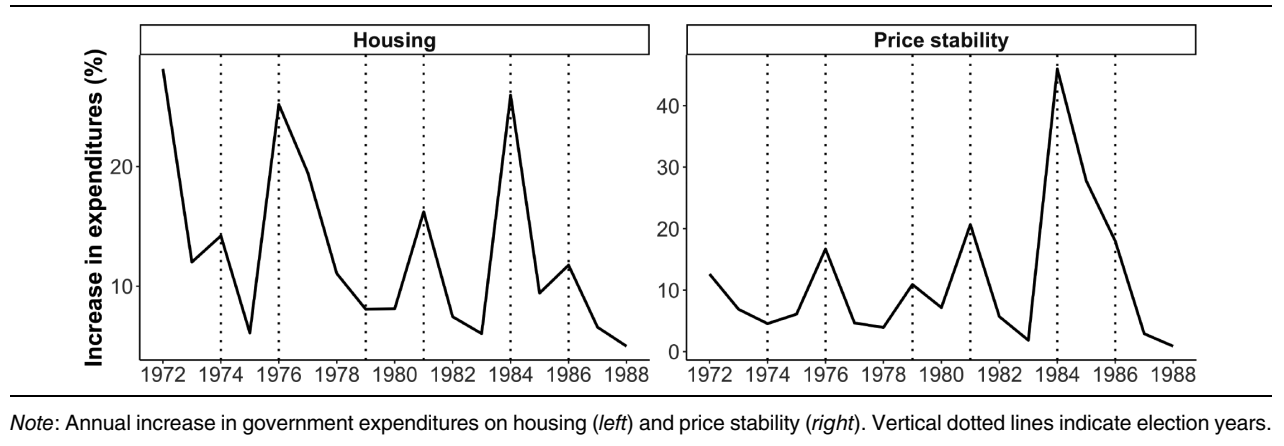
Responsiveness as a Signal of Competence

I propose that the goal of improved responsiveness was to signal competence to voters. To support this argument, I exploit the distinction between critical and other petitions in the *Council of Ministers* data. Critical petitions contained a direct criticism of a government decision or the functioning of the government more broadly. Writers of these petitions directly questioned the competence of the regime by claiming that the failure of the government to live up to its promises violated the socialist social contract. I thus expect that response times for critical petitions decreased particularly strongly before elections.

Model 1 in Table 5 supports this argument by adding an interaction between critical petitions and the preelection period to Equation 2. The point estimates imply that, while critical petitions received a faster response than other petitions throughout the period examined, this difference was more than three times as large before the election ($p < 0.01$). The average response time for critical petitions was about 37.4%²³ shorter than for noncritical petitions before elections, compared with 10.4%²⁴ in the three months thereafter.

²³ $100 \times (e^{-0.110-0.359} - 1)$.

²⁴ $100 \times (e^{-0.110} - 1)$.

FIGURE 5. Government Expenditures on Housing and Price Stability Increased More Strongly in Election Years

The Role of Central Government

In theory, both local officials—to advance their careers—or the central government—to deter challengers and gather information—had incentives to improve responsiveness before elections. However, I find that improved responsiveness was driven primarily by the central government. Model 2 in Table 5 adds an interaction between the preelection period and central government response to Equation 2. The resulting coefficient is negative and significant at $p < 0.01$: petitions answered by the central government usually had a 21.0% shorter response time²⁵ than those answered by other entities during the postelection period. This difference rose to 36.2% before elections²⁶.

Models 3 and 4 show that these faster response times are not driven by increased selectivity of which petitions were answered by the central government. They use linear probability models to show that petitions were actually *more* likely to be answered by the central government, whose propensity to respond rose by 6.6 percentage points (or 25% relative to the mean) before elections (Model 3; $p < 0.01$). Including an interaction between the preelection period and critical petitions shows that the central government paid particular attention to critical petitions (Model 4): while critical petitions were about 10.3 percentage points less likely to receive a central government response after the election, they were 7.2 points ($-0.103 + 0.175$) more likely to receive a central government response before the election ($p < 0.01$).

Taken together, my results provide strong evidence that even uncontested elections incentivize government officials to respond to citizen requests. The motivation is to assure voters of the government's competence. This effect is primarily driven by the central government.

Alternative Explanations

This section rules out multiple alternative explanations for my findings. First, it is possible that my results are driven by differences in the volume or content of petitions. As shown in Figure 3a above, citizens submitted slightly more petitions before elections. Higher incoming petition volume may have made it easier for bureaucrats to strategically respond to the petitions they could answer quickly, thus artificially inflating the difference in response times between the pre- and postelection periods.

Yet, the data do not support this concern. More incoming petitions were usually met with concomitant increases in the volume of government responses. By law, government officials had only four weeks to submit an initial response, which significantly curtailed the regime's ability to strategically select "easy" petitions. Second, the spikes in petition volume seem to be driven by seasonality effects instead of the electoral cycle. I support this conclusion in the Appendix, where I test for differences in the number of incoming petitions and responses between the pre- and postelection periods. Using the empirical strategy defined in Equation 1, which explicitly accounts for seasonality effects by including day-fixed effects, I find no differences in petition volume before and after elections.

I also find little evidence that citizens strategically submitted different kinds of petitions in anticipation of better government responsiveness, nor was the regime more selective in choosing which petitions to answer before elections. As shown in the Appendix, there were few differences in the topics of incoming petitions or responses between the pre- and postelection periods. The one exception is incoming *Council of Ministers* petitions, which were more often about domestic affairs before elections. However, this increase was accompanied by a concomitant increase in responses about domestic affairs. Moreover, I show in the Appendix that controlling for petition topic, character, and reference leaves the coefficients of interest unaltered.

Last, it is possible that the regime's increased efforts during the preelection period reduced its resources to

²⁵ $100 \times (e^{-0.236} - 1)$.

²⁶ $100 \times (e^{-0.236-0.213} - 1)$.

TABLE 5. Critical Petitions and Petitions Answered by the Central Government Saw Particularly Strong Decreases in Response Times before Elections

	Response time (log days)		Central government response	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Preelection	-0.101*** (0.037)	-0.125*** (0.026)	0.066*** (0.020)	0.005 (0.022)
Contains criticism	-0.110*** (0.041)			-0.103*** (0.020)
Preelection × Contains criticism	-0.359*** (0.060)			0.175*** (0.032)
Central government responds		-0.236*** (0.036)		
Preelection × Central government responds		-0.213*** (0.054)		
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	4,634	4,014	4,014	4,005
Adjusted R^2	0.184	0.284	0.052	0.060

Note: Difference in responsiveness among critical petitions (Model 1) or petitions answered by the central government (Model 2). Models 3 and 4 explore the correlates of central government responses. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

respond to petitions afterwards. If true, my results may be driven by a postelection slowdown in responsiveness instead of a preelection improvement. In the Appendix, I conduct the analysis of responsiveness to *People's Chamber* petitions separately for the pre- and postelection periods. I find improved responsiveness in election years in the preelection sample, but no differences in the postelection data.

A second alternative explanation emphasizes bureaucratic or legislative *turnover* after elections. Outgoing officials may have wanted to finalize pending petitions before leaving their position. Alternatively, new officials who started after the election may require some time to familiarize themselves with the job, which would slow down initial response times. The data are again inconsistent with this argument. Responsiveness to *Council of Ministers* petitions improved before the 1989 local elections, even though this election did not alter the Council's composition. I further show in the Appendix that response times to *People's Chamber* petitions decreased before both local and national legislative elections, even though only the latter affected the composition of the *People's Chamber*.

It is further possible that petitions were assigned a later *receipt date* before elections, potentially in an effort to artificially deflate response times. I provide evidence against this idea in the Appendix: there were few differences in the number of days between the dates a petition was written and received.

DISCUSSION

Many closed autocracies hold uncontested elections in which a citizen's only choice is whether or not to support the regime's handpicked candidates.

According to conventional models of accountability, the absence of contestation in these elections should preclude any meaningful government responsiveness to citizen preferences. With the election outcome a foregone conclusion, officials are theorized to lack the incentive to cater to their constituents' demands.

Yet, the petition system of the former German Democratic Republic is at odds with this model of autocratic unresponsiveness. My paper instead describes a regime that spent significant resources on both responding to and addressing citizen demands. That responsiveness varied systematically around elections is evidence of an "electoral connection" (Mayhew 1987) in one of the least democratic regimes.

The analysis of the GDR's petition system informs our understanding of contemporary authoritarianism more broadly. The electoral cycles of responsiveness documented in this paper likely exist in a variety of autocracies. Petition systems are employed widely across autocracies that vary with respect to their ideology, state capacity, and level of electoral contestation. Just like the former GDR, autocracies ranging from the Soviet Union (Dimitrov 2014a), Bulgaria (Dimitrov 2014b), and Iraq (Walter 2018) in the past to China (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Jee 2021, Luehrmann 2003), Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam (Pan 2020, 166) today use petition systems. Petition volume is high in these countries. East Germans wrote up to one million (Mühlberg 2004) petitions to all levels and branches of government every year, which equaled about 81 petitions per 1,000 voters. Similarly, up to 700,000 petitions were written in communist Bulgaria every year (Dimitrov 2014b), corresponding to 10.6% of the electorate, and the central committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union alone received about half a million petitions annually (Dimitrov 2014a). Thus, the paper draws attention to

an important electoral mobilization strategy in autocracies that has received little scholarly attention to date.

Moreover, I expect autocracies with more contested elections than the GDR to have similar incentives to engage in electoral cycles of responsiveness. On the one hand, multicandidate elections in closed autocracies (e.g., Cuba and Vietnam), in which multiple regime-aligned candidates run against each other, bear the same risks of elite splits and antiregime mobilization surrounding “stolen elections” as completely uncontested elections. These elections also inform the regime about the quality and competence of local political candidates (Fonseca Galvis and Superti 2019; Malesky and Schuler 2013), which requires strong citizen support. On the other hand, competition can be fierce in multiparty autocratic elections such that the regime needs high support to deter challengers and secure electoral victory. These elections are thus likely to structure not just government spending (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2006; Pepinsky 2007; Shmuel 2020) but also responsiveness to citizen demands.

My research emphasizes the importance of competence in generating political order in authoritarian regimes (Huntington 1968). One reason for the stability of the former GDR was the government’s ability to forge *and* uphold an implicit social contract with the population (Cook and Dimitrov 2017; Dale 2005; Dickson et al. 2016). The petition system played a crucial role in this process. Petitions allowed the government to identify and address popular concerns and demonstrate its competence (Gorgulu, Sharafutdinova, and Steinbuck 2020). However, it also generated popular expectations about what the government ought to deliver. The extent to which the government was able to meet these expectations determined its stability. It remains an open question to what extent low-state-capacity regimes are similarly able to use petition systems as strategically as the former GDR. The existence of petition systems in such contexts casts some doubt on the idea that high state capacity is a precondition for the dynamics described in this paper (Walter 2018).

The paper’s results have implications for our theorizing about authoritarianism more broadly. Most work on authoritarian responsiveness considers the incentives of local officials (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Jee 2021). My finding that the central government may have stronger incentives and capacities to respond than local governments calls for more research on the role of the central government in service delivery and responsiveness. Moreover, I identify a mechanism by which citizens can hold their government accountable in contexts without electoral contestation. This result adds to an emerging research agenda on how citizens can influence political outcomes even in nondemocratic regimes (Williamson and Magaloni 2020). While past work on authoritarianism usually focuses on how dictators manage elites and opponents (Gandhi 2008; Malesky and Schuler 2011, 2013; Truex 2014), more research is needed on the interactions between autocratic governments and ordinary citizens to better understand how citizens can

influence politics even in some of the most repressive regimes in the world.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001386>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data and replication files that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YLCN5E>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Aala Abdelgadir, Feyaad Allie, Binio Binev, Lisa Blaydes, Alberto Díaz-Cayeros, Martin Dimitrov, Valentín Figueroa, Vicky Fouka, Anna Grzymala-Busse, Jens Hainmueller, Roman Hlatky, Haemin Jee, Jiwon Kim, Elisabeth van Lieshout, Ellen Lust, Nic Lyon, Rachel Myrick, Jonathan Rodden, Rose Shaber-Twedt, Sarah Thompson, Henry Thomson, Matt Tyler, participants at MPSA 2021 and APSA 2021, three anonymous reviewers, and the editors for their valuable comments and suggestions. I am grateful for financial support from The Europe Center at Stanford, the Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society, Stanford’s Graduate Research Opportunity Fund, the Freeman Spogli Institute, and the Shultz Fellowship for Economic Policy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

REFERENCES

- Akhmedov, Akhmed, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2004. “Opportunistic Political Cycles: Test in a Young Democracy Setting.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 119 (4): 1301–38.
- Ansorg, Leonore. 1993. “Für Frieden und Sozialismus—seid bereit!” Zur politischen Instrumentalisierung der Jungen Pioniere von Beginn ihrer Gründung bis Ende der 1950er Jahre. In *Historische DDR-Forschung: Aufsätze und Studien*, ed. Jürgen Kocka, 169–90. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Bahry, Donna, and Brian D. Silver. 1990. “Soviet Citizen Participation on the Eve of Democratization.” *American Political Science Review* 84 (3): 821–47.

- Baldwin, Kate, and Eric Mvukiyehe. 2015. "Elections and Collective Action: Evidence from Changes in Traditional Institutions in Liberia." *World Politics* 67 (4): 690–725.
- Blaydes, Lisa. 2011. *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Block, Steven A., Karen E. Ferree, and Smita Singh. 2003. "Multiparty Competition, Founding Elections and Political Business Cycles in Africa." *Journal of African Economies* 12 (3): 444–68.
- bpb. 2019. "Wahlbetrug 1989—als die DDR-Regierung ihre Glaubwürdigkeit verlor." Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, May 7, 2019. <https://www.bpb.de/politik/hintergrund-aktuell/290562/1989-wahlbetrug-in-der-ddr>.
- Brender, Adi, and Allan Drazen. 2005. "Political Budget Cycles in New versus Established Democracies." *Journal of Monetary Economics* 52 (7): 1271–95.
- Bunce, Valerie J. 1980. "The Succession Connection: Policy Cycles and Political Change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe." *American Political Science Review* 74 (4): 966–77.
- Burnett, Craig M., and Vladimir Kogan. 2016. "The Politics of Potholes: Service Quality and Retrospective Voting in Local Elections." *Journal of Politics* 79 (1): 302–14.
- Chapman, Hannah S. 2021. "Shoring Up Autocracy: Participatory Technologies and Regime Support in Putin's Russia." *Comparative Political Studies* 54 (8): 1459–89.
- Cheibub, Jose Antonio, and Jude C. Hays. 2015. "Elections and Civil War in Africa." *Political Science Research and Methods* 5 (1): 81–102.
- Chen, Jidong, Jennifer Pan, and Yiqing Xu. 2016. "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China." *American Journal of Political Science* 60 (2): 383–400.
- Cho, Joan E., Jae Seung Lee, and B. K. Song. 2019. "Mind the Electoral Gap: The Effect of Investment in Public Infrastructure on Authoritarian Support in South Korea." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 54 (2): 473–500.
- Christensen, Darin, and Simon Ejdemyr. 2020. "Do Elections Improve Constituency Responsiveness? Evidence from US Cities." *Political Science Research and Methods* 8 (3): 459–76.
- Class, Fabian, Ulrich Kohler, and Martin Krawietz. 2018. "The Potsdam Grievance Statistics File. New Data on Quality of Life and Political Participation for the German Democratic Republic 1970–1989." *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 51 (2): 92–114.
- Cook, Linda J., and Martin K. Dimitrov. 2017. "The Social Contract Revisited: Evidence from Communist and State Capitalist Economies." *Europe-Asia Studies* 69 (1): 8–26.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dale, Gareth. 2005. *Popular Protest in East Germany, 1945–1989*. London: Routledge.
- Der Spiegel. 1990. "Fliegende Urnen: DDR-Staatsanwälte tun sich schwer, Schuldige für den Wahlbetrug im vorigen Jahr zu finden. Immerhin ist nun amtlich, wie getrickst wurde." *Der Spiegel*. March 11. <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13497863.html>.
- Dickson, Bruce J., Pierre F. Landry, Mingming Shen, and Jie Yan. 2016. "Public Goods and Regime Support in Urban China." *The China Quarterly* 228: 859–80.
- Dimitrov, Martin K. 2014a. "Tracking Public Opinion under Authoritarianism: The Case of the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev Era." *Russian History* 41 (3): 329–53.
- Dimitrov, Martin K. 2014b. "What the Party Wanted to Know: Citizen Complaints as 'Barometer of Public Opinion' in Communist Bulgaria." *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 28 (2): 271–95.
- Dimitrov, Martin K. 2017. Anticipating Crises in Autocracies. In *Crisis in Autocratic Regimes*, eds. Johannes Gerschewski and Christoph H. Stefes, 21–41. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ding, Iza. 2020. "Performative Governance." *World Politics* 72 (4): 525–56.
- Dipoppa, Gemma, and Guy Grossman. 2020. "The Effect of Election Proximity on Government Responsiveness and Citizens' Participation: Evidence from English Local Elections." *Comparative Political Studies* 53 (14): 2183–212.
- Distelhorst, Greg, and Yue Hou. 2014. "Ingroup Bias in Official Behavior: A National Field Experiment in China." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 9 (2): 203–30.
- Distelhorst, Greg, and Yue Hou. 2017. "Constituency Service under Nondemocratic Rule: Evidence from China." *Journal of Politics* 79 (3): 1024–40.
- Esberg, Jane. 2021. "Anticipating Dissent: The Repression of Politicians in Pinochet's Chile." *Journal of Politics* 83 (2): 689–705.
- Fearon, James D., Macartan Humphreys, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. 2015. "How Does Development Assistance Affect Collective Action Capacity? Results from a Field Experiment in Post-Conflict Liberia." *American Political Science Review* 109 (3): 450–69.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. 2005. *Tear Off the Mask! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fonseca Galvis, Ángela, and Chiara Superti. 2019. "Who Wins the Most When Everybody Wins? Predicting Candidate Performance in an Authoritarian Election." *Democratization* 26 (7): 1278–98.
- Gandhi, Jennifer. 2008. *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gandhi, Jennifer, and Ellen Lust-Okar. 2009. "Elections under Authoritarianism." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (1): 403–22.
- Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. 2014. "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set." *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (2): 313–31.
- Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. 2018. *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gonzalez, Maria de los Angeles. 2002. "Do Changes in Democracy Affect the Political Budget Cycle? Evidence from Mexico." *Review of Development Economics* 6 (2): 204–24.
- Gorgulu, Nisan, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, and Jevgenijs Steinbuks. 2020. "Political Dividends of Digital Participatory Governance: Evidence from Moscow Pothole Management." *Policy Research Working Paper* 9445.
- Guo, Gang. 2009. "China's Local Political Budget Cycles." *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (3): 621–32.
- Guriey, Sergei, and Daniel Treisman. 2020. "The Popularity of Authoritarian Leaders: A Cross-National Investigation." *World Politics* 72 (4): 601–38.
- Hafner-Burton, Emilie M., Susan D. Hyde, and Ryan S. Jablonski. 2016. "Surviving Elections: Election Violence, Incumbent Victory, and Post-Election Repercussions." *British Journal of Political Science* 48 (2): 459–88.
- Harris, Adam S., and Erin Hern. 2019. "Taking to the Streets: Protest as an Expression of Political Preference in Africa." *Comparative Political Studies* 52 (8): 1169–99.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1968. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2020. PARLINE Database on National Parliaments [computer file]. <http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp>.
- Jee, Haemin. 2021. "Local Level Incentives and Government Responsiveness in China." Unpublished manuscript. Stanford University.
- Karklings, Rasma. 1986. "Soviet Elections Revisited: Voter Abstention in Noncompetitive Voting." *American Political Science Review* 80 (2): 449–70.
- Knutsen, Carl Henrik, Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, and Tore Wig. 2017. "Autocratic Elections: Stabilizing Tool or Force for Change?" *World Politics* 69 (1): 98–143.
- Kuntz, Philipp, and Mark R. Thompson. 2009. "More Than Just the Final Straw: Stolen Elections as Revolutionary Triggers." *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (3): 253–72.
- Kuran, Timur. 1991. "Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989." *World Politics* 44 (1): 7–48.
- Lueders, Hans. 2021. "Replication Data for: Electoral Responsiveness in Closed Autocracies: Evidence from Petitions in the former German Democratic Republic." Harvard Dataverse. Dataset. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YLNC5E>.
- Luehrmann, Laura M. 2003. "Facing Citizen Complaints in China, 1951–1996." *Asian Survey* 43 (5): 845–66.

- Lust-Okar, Ellen. 2006. "Elections under Authoritarianism: Preliminary Lessons from Jordan." *Democratization* 13 (3): 456–71.
- Lust-Okar, Ellen. 2008. Competitive Clientelism in Jordanian Elections. In *Political Participation in the Middle East*, eds. Ellen Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni, 75–94. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Magaloni, Beatriz. 2006. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Magaloni, Beatriz, and Ruth Kricheli. 2010. "Political Order and One-Party Rule." *Annual Review of Political Science* 13: 123–43.
- Malesky, Edmund, and Paul Schuler. 2010. "Nodding or Needling: Analyzing Delegate Responsiveness in an Authoritarian Parliament." *American Political Science Review* 104 (3): 482–502.
- Malesky, Edmund, and Paul Schuler. 2011. "The Single-Party Dictator's Dilemma: Information in Elections without Opposition." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36 (4): 491–531.
- Malesky, Edmund, and Paul Schuler. 2013. "Star Search: Do Elections Help Nondemocratic Regimes Identify New Leaders?" *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13 (1): 35–68.
- Manion, Melanie. 2015. *Information for Autocrats: Representation in Chinese Local Congresses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martinez-Bravo, Monica, Gerard Padró i Miquel, Nancy Qian, and Yang Yao. 2020. "The Rise and Fall of Local Elections in China." Unpublished manuscript.
- Mayhew, David R. 1987. The Electoral Connection and the Congress. In *Congress: Structure and Policy*, eds. Matthew D. Cubbins, Randall Calvert, and Terry Sullivan, 18–29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mühlberg, Felix. 2004. *Bürger, Bitten und Behörden: Geschichte der Eingaben in der DDR*. Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag.
- Pan, Jennifer. 2020. *Welfare for Autocrats: How Social Assistance in China Cares for its Rulers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pepinsky, Thomas. 2007. "Autocracy, Elections, and Fiscal Policy: Evidence from Malaysia." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 42 (1): 136–63.
- Pfaff, Steven. 2001. "The Limits of Coercive Surveillance: Social and Penal Control in the German Democratic Republic." *Punishment & Society* 3 (3): 381–407.
- Pingel-Schliemann, Sandra. 2009. Zerstörung von Biografien: Zersetzung als Phänomen der Honecker-Ära. In *Die demokratische Revolution 1989 in der DDR*, eds. Eckart Conze, Katharina Gajdukowa, and Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten, 78–91. Cologne: Böhlau.
- Popplewell, Richard. 1992. "The Stasi and the East German Revolution of 1989." *Contemporary European History* 1 (1): 37–63.
- Powell, G. Bingham. 2004. "Political Representation in Comparative Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 7: 273–96.
- Przeworski, Adam, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin, eds. 1999. Elections and Representation. In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, 29–54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schedler, Andreas. 2006. The Logic of Electoral Authoritarianism. In *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Logic of Unfree Competition*, ed. Andreas Schedler, 1–26. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. 1950. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper.
- Shi, Tianjian. 1999. "Voting and Nonvoting in China: Voting Behavior in Plebiscitary and Limited-Choice Elections." *Journal of Politics* 61 (4): 1115–39.
- Shmuel, Assaf. 2020. "The Political Budget Cycle across Varying Degrees of Democracy." *Electoral Studies* 68:e102218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102218>.
- Simpser, Alberto. 2013. *Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections: Theory, Practice, and Implications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sjoberg, Fredrik M., Jonathan Mellon, and Tiago Peixoto. 2017. "The Effect of Bureaucratic Responsiveness on Citizen Participation." *Public Administration Review* 77 (3): 340–51.
- Stadt, Jochen. 1996. "Eingaben: Die institutionalisierte Meckerkultur in der DDR." *Arbeitspapiere des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat* 24/1996.
- Staatliche Zentralverwaltung für Statistik. 1989. *Statistisches Jahrbuch 1989 der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*. Berlin, Germany: Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik.
- Tao, Yi-Feng. 2006. "The Evolution of 'Political Business Cycle' in Post-Mao China." *Issues & Studies* 42 (1): 163–94.
- Truex, Rory. 2014. "The Returns to Office in a 'Rubber Stamp' Parliament." *American Political Science Review* 108 (2): 235–51.
- Truex, Rory. 2016. *Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Truex, Rory. 2017. "Consultative Authoritarianism and Its Limits." *Comparative Political Studies* 50 (3): 329–61.
- Tsai, Lily L. 2007. *Accountability without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tsai, Lily L., and Yiqing Xu. 2018. "Outspoken Insiders: Political Connections and Citizen Participation in Authoritarian China." *Political Behavior* 40 (3): 629–57.
- Tsai, Pi-Han. 2016. "Fiscal Incentives and Political Budget Cycles in China." *International Tax and Public Finance* 23 (6): 1030–73.
- Tucker, Joshua A. 2007. "Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions." *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (3):535–51.
- Veiga, Francisco Jose, Linda Gonçalves Veiga, and Atsuyoshi Morozumi. 2017. "Political Budget Cycles and Media Freedom." *Electoral Studies* 45 (1): 88–99.
- Walter, Alissa. 2018. Petitioning Saddam: Voices from the Iraqi Archives. In *Truth, Silence and Violence in Emerging States*, ed. Aidan Russell, 127–46. London: Routledge.
- Weber, Gudrun, and Bernd Florath. 2019. "Nun falten Sie den Zettel ...": Wahlen in der DDR in der Überlieferung der Staatsicherheit (1949-1961). Berlin: BStU.
- Williamson, Scott, and Beatriz Magaloni. 2020. "Legislatures and Policy Making in Authoritarian Regimes." *Comparative Political Studies* 53 (9): 1525–43.
- Wintrobe, Ronald. 1998. *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittenburg, Siegfried. 2018. "Zettel falten, Schnauze halten: Wählen in der DDR." *Der Spiegel*, October 21. <https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/wahlsonntag-in-der-ddr-zettel-falten-schnauze-halten-a-1232354.html>.
- Wolle, Stefan. 1998. *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971–1989*. Berlin: Ch. Links.
- Zaslavsky, Victor, and Robert J. Brym. 1978. "The Functions of Elections in the USSR." *Soviet Studies* 30 (3): 362–71.