democratic retreat in Africa today. Instead, varied and distinctive country trajectories point to high levels of ongoing contention around democratic rights, practices, inclusion, representation, and accountability. Just as many incumbents deploy tools of manipulation to maintain themselves in power, individual citizens, civil society groups, and political parties have sporadic and intense periods of contestation to mobilize for their rights and representation through accountable democratic governance.

In this way, the book underscores some of the core *mechanisms* highlighted in the new attention to democratic backsliding around the world: elected incumbents using the institutional levers of executive, legislative, judicial, and administrative control to limit contestation and participation through technically democratic—and potentially legitimating—processes. From Kenya's constitutional bargaining to Zambia's legal and legislative restrictions on opposition mobilization, the chapters demonstrate the processes through which elected political elites *use institutions* to maintain democratic stagnation or forms of competitive authoritarianism while they tilt the playing field and concentrate power.

At the same time, Arriola, Rakner, and van de Walle also emphasize that these mechanisms result in stagnation, rather than further autocratization, because of the significant, if sporadic, mobilization for democracy through civil society, electoral mobilization of opposition parties, and the electorate. Voters remain committed to democracy in theory and practice. Protests against autocratic overreach create constraints for greater executive aggrandizement and bolster judiciaries in some cases to overturn flawed elections, such as in Malawi. The significant contestation between would-be autocrats and those pushing for greater democratic reform leads to a kind of stasis, a stagnation of the democratic trajectory in Africa that is underpinned by continuing struggle.

When we compare the findings of the book to the global trends, we find that, empirically, Africa in aggregate has not experienced dramatic downturns in democracy rankings like in Hungary, Turkey, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and others that are driving the trendlines. As the authors make clear, this is in part a function of the starting point: democratic backsliding measures require the country to start clearly above a threshold of electoral democracy. Only a few countries across the continent have reliably been classified as such, and so the starting point matters when we are discussing the number of countries that are experiencing democratic backsliding. It is also true that even where autocratization has occurred in Africa over the last decade, the level of democratic decline has been attenuated. Autocratization has solidified several countries' position as competitive authoritarian regimes, but they have not experienced the kind of extreme closing of political space and hard autocratization that we observe in Nicaragua or Hungary.

It is important not to lose sight of what the underlying and ongoing contestations between pro- and antidemocratic forces can tell us, even while they average out in aggregate to what appears to be a steady state. In this respect, the authors provide three key takeaways that accord with the broader emerging literature on democratic backsliding. First, the autocratizing political elite are generally institutionalists who use legal mechanisms to try to consolidate power and tilt the playing field.

Second, international factors weigh heavily in old and new ways. The traditional role of donors, political conditionalities, and international linkage is still apparent but is less significant in the current geopolitical context with the War on Terror and the emergence of China as a significant regional actor. Economic growth and the emergence of international remittances and foreign direct investment have decreased the macroeconomic dependence on donor aid and, therefore, donor leverage. The new twist on the international is that incumbents also use ideational resources and marshal sovereignty claims against external agents to defend themselves and stymie the opposition. Here again, the preexisting factors are leveraged in new ways as pro- and antidemocratic actors continue to evolve in their contestation strategies.

Third, African citizens continue to care about democracy, and voters and opposition parties mobilize around elections and protest points. Yet, resource constraints and the co-optation of civil society and leading elites have weakened democratic actors. The opposition has to work harder just to maintain ground in the face of incumbent institutionalized power concentration.

In sum, the book's conclusions are inspiring and troubling, paralleling the ongoing forms of contestation. Democratization in Africa has stalled and often stagnated; incumbents have successfully honed tools to limit the further deepening of democracy but have not necessarily completely derailed pro-democracy actors. Across the continent, we see a great deal of struggle and ongoing contention: the fate of democracy may still be in citizens' hands as they demand and practice it.

In memory of Nicolas van de Walle.

Propaganda in Autocracies: Institutions, Information, and the Politics of Belief. By Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 526p. £26.99 cloth.
doi:10.1017/S1537592724001233

— Haifeng Huang, *The Ohio State University*
huang.5457@osu.edu

This is an ambitious book on the use and impact of propaganda in authoritarian regimes. Previous research on propaganda has primarily been single-country studies. Carter and Carter instead constructed an impressive global

dataset consisting of over eight million articles from state-run newspapers in 59 countries and in six major languages, and an elaborate set of text analyses, cross-country regression analyses, and survey experiments runs through the 500-plus page tome. While it is often difficult to tell what is really going on in data in cross-national regressions, the authors helpfully add various illustrative case studies in the book. The book's central argument is that regimes without meaningful electoral constraints tend to use over-the-top and absurd propaganda in order to signal their capacity for repression and domination; regimes with meaningful electoral constraints, on the other hand, use more neutral and credible propaganda in order to persuade. In addition to arguing this central thesis, the authors also tested a variety of interesting hypotheses regarding authoritarian newspapers' international coverage, the calendar of propaganda, and the effects of propaganda on protest.

The sheer scale of the analysis makes the book a clear and valuable contribution to the literature on political propaganda, particularly on the empirical front. The conceptual distinction between propaganda as *domination* and propaganda as *persuasion* is by now a relatively familiar one, albeit termed *hard* vs. *soft* propaganda in the existing literature. Relatedly, the *signaling theory* of (hard) propaganda has argued that authoritarian regimes can signal their capacity for social control and repression by imposing extravagant and heavy-handed propaganda on society; the goal is not to persuade citizens of the regime's merits but to deter dissent. This theory has previously been tested in the context of individual countries such as China, Syria, Vietnam, and Venezuela. By validating the theory with a global newspaper dataset and a series of survey experiments, Carter and Carter make an important contribution to our understanding of the nature and effects of authoritarian propaganda. One gem in the analysis is their use of Fox News's coverage of Republicans and Democrats in the United States as a comparison to illustrate the extent of coverage positivity in authoritarian state media, which is revealing and instructive (e.g., in unconstrained autocracies, state propaganda is about four times more pro-regime than Fox News is pro-Republican).

A key contribution of the book is highlighting the typical institutional features that go with different types of propaganda. At the same time, while the correlation between levels of institutional constraints and different types of propaganda seems clear, the causal language the book uses to describe their relationship can occasionally be confusing. Institutions are endogenous to political games and those in authoritarian regimes, in particular, reflect power relations between social actors. Thus, it may be the presence or lack of a ruler's dominating power that determines both the level of institutional constraints in the country *and* whether the media is completely subjugated as a tool for signaling that power. As the book appears to acknowledge in chapter 1, a regime without sufficiently dominating power has no choice but to respect some institutional constraints *and* sometimes concede bad news and policy failures in the media. This is what the signaling theory of hard/dominating propaganda would imply: It is the possession of sufficient power and repressive capacity that enables a "strong" ruler to signal their power with hard propaganda in a separating equilibrium.

The authors are well aware of the potential omission of such compound factors in their causal analysis of institutions and propaganda and offer case studies of Gabon in the 1990s and China in the last decade to rule them out. But that discussion focuses on leadership changes and socio-economic development, not power relationships within the countries. As the book makes clear, although Gabon in the 1990s did not experience leadership change, President Bongo's power relationship with the rest of society changed significantly during the period. The third wave of democratization ushered in student protests and labor strikes and, consequently, "the opposition [controlled] the streets" (p. 147). Combined with new pressures from France, Bongo was forced to make political concessions such as imposing presidential term limits and legalizing independent newspapers. The increasing electoral constraints and the softening of state media might be best understood as a common result of the changing power relationship, rather than one causing the other.

The book offers a perceptive analysis of authoritarian newspapers' coverage of international news, which has not been the focus of the existing literature. Since most people know (far) less about foreign countries than about their own countries, this potentially gives authoritarian media more scope to present extravagantly negative propaganda about foreign countries. Paradoxically, Carter and Carter point out that people's lack of a basis to judge the absurdity of propaganda about foreign/international news will make propaganda narratives in this area more similar across regime types than propaganda about domestic conditions, since the signaling power of hard/dominating propaganda lies in the fact that its absurdity is commonly known. This astute observation is backed by some evidence from the data. There could be a complementary reason for the similarity of authoritarian regimes' foreign narratives. Since these regimes have fewer resources to cover foreign news than domestic news, they rely on foreign media and international wire services to draw materials, and there are plenty of negative coverage to draw from foreign free media, hence the similarities.

The authors also make an important observation about the tradeoff in media narratives about the outside world. On the one hand, regimes have an interest in reporting foreign governance failures and instability, and the literature on international benchmarking has shown that a negative comparison benefits domestic regimes. On the other hand, foreign instability that may involve the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001233

changing of government may also encourage protests at home. The book thus hypothesizes that authoritarian media will emphasize foreign governance failures and social decay but report less about elections and protests. Choosing what foreign news to cover is indeed a challenging question, and there is support for the authors' hypothesis in the cross-national data. To be sure, widespread protest and unrest are perhaps the best proof of foreign failures, so the tradeoff is delicate. There may be opportunities for further theorizing and analysis of this understudied topic.

Several later chapters of the book deal with the calendar or cycles of propaganda, another under-explored topic in the existing literature. The questions examined include when regimes are more likely to issue threats of repression via propaganda, spikes in propaganda during election seasons, and the use of propaganda vs. censorship around politically sensitive dates. Among the various interesting findings and observations, perhaps the most striking argument is that China uses propaganda about maintaining "social stability" in Xinjiang around the anniversaries of the Tiananmen Movement to deter future pro-democracy protest in Han-majority regions. While maintaining social stability is indeed a code word for social control—and even repression in many contexts—and the abovementioned argument is not implausible, more evidence might be needed to support this conclusion. This is partly because, as the authors point out, most (Han) Chinese citizens are unsympathetic to separatist movements in Xinjiang, so for them maintaining social stability in the region is something to be welcomed rather than feared. Empirically, only in half of the years since the 2009 Xinjiang ethnic conflicts was the rate of Xinjiang coverage in the *People's Daily* during the Tiananmen anniversary higher than on non-sensitive days (Figure 9.10). And in 2009, as the authors acknowledge, there was a spike in Xinjiang coverage during the Tiananmen anniversary, one month before the occurrence of the ethnic conflict that prompted the Chinese government's subsequent harsh anti-separatist policies. It appears that using narratives about Xinjiang to deter the majority Han Chinese population is not a consistent strategy, and there might be something else going on that contributes to some of the spikes.

The final substantive chapter of the book is on propaganda's effects on protest. Whereas previous studies on the topic are primarily survey experiments examining people's protest intentions, this chapter analyses cross-national observational data and shows that pro-regime propaganda is indeed negatively associated with the occurrences of protests at a nontrivial level. Testing propaganda's effects on real-world protests is a significant advance in the literature, even if the swiftness of the effect (the next day) might be a little surprising. Intriguingly, this chapter also argues that *Workers' Daily*'s propaganda narratives on the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements in western China's Tibet and Xinjiang regions would reduce protests in China's eastern provinces. The identification strategy here is refreshing: Outside Tibet and Xinjiang, most Chinese citizens are not particularly aware of the ethnic conflict anniversaries; therefore, national media narratives targeting western minority regions can be plausibly regarded as an exogenous treatment in the eastern regions. The results, however, raise a question because the *Worker's Daily* is a legacy Maoist-era newspaper and not widely read in China nowadays, even though some industrial enterprises and government offices are required to subscribe to it. As a piece of telling evidence, the newspaper's Weibo microblogging account usually receives very few and often zero comments and reposts. In contrast, the *People's Daily*'s Weibo posts routinely receive hundreds or thousands of comments and reposts. How can a low-impact newspaper's coverage achieve a significant effect on real-world protest behavior? Further research on this question might generate useful insights.

Overall, this is a rich book with impressive data and many astute observations. It contributes to the literature on propaganda both by validating previous findings about hard and soft propaganda using a global dataset, and by offering and testing a series of interesting hypotheses about several under-explored topics. While not every finding is conclusive, the book does raise important and intriguing questions that future research can follow up on. Scholars interested in how propaganda works as a hallmark of authoritarian rule will want to keep this book close at hand.

Brexit Britain: The Consequences of the Vote to Leave the European Union. By Paul Whiteley, Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Marianne C. Stewart. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 280p. £14.99 cloth.
doi:10.1017/S1537592724001191

— Gylfi Zoega, *University of Iceland*
gz@hi.is

This interesting book documents the political turmoil that followed the referendum on EU membership in 2016, applies statistical techniques to decipher the changing voting pattern in the United Kingdom, and finally assesses the long-term economic and political effects of the referendum results.

A striking feature of the book is the contrast between the political turmoil described in the first part of the book and the finding that EU membership had no discernible effect on productivity or productivity growth over the 43 years of membership. Taking these and other results in the book at face value, the reader may conclude that the political class and society was struck by collective madness in the period of 2016–2020. Much ado about nothing.

While the description of the political bedlam that followed the referendum under the short-lived