

Violence, Non-violence, and the Effects of International Human Rights Law

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Abstract

Under what conditions are individuals more likely to approve of human rights abuses by their governments? While many theoretical expectations have been offered about public approval of repression, many of them have not been directly tested. We analyze the effects of differing opposition tactics, differing government tactics, and legal constraints on approval of repression through a series of survey experiments in India, Israel, and Argentina. Our results indicate that violent action by opposition groups consistently increases support for government repression. In the context of contentious politics, we find that the effects of international law vary by national context. While our respondents in India were less likely to approve of their government when told the government violated international law, the same information likely increased approval of the government in our Israel experiment. The findings provide insights into the micro-foundations of existing theories and suggest areas for theory refinement.

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1. Introduction

Under what conditions are individuals more likely to approve of human rights abuses by their governments? One of the core responsibilities often mandated to governments, especially in democracies, is the guarantee of basic rights and freedoms to their citizens. In this light, public support for abuses, especially violent abuses such as torture, presents somewhat of a puzzle. Individuals are not only concerned with fairness and justice, but often also with counterbalancing concerns about protection from internal and external threats. Examining the conditions under which publics are willing to reject or approve of the resort to repression can therefore provide a crucial understanding, at the micro-foundational level, of the circumstances under which mass opinion serves as a constraint, or enabler, of human rights abuses.

Macro-level theory suggests that both the characteristics of a conflict and legal institutions can affect support for repression. Public approval of human rights abuses depends in part on the tactics used by the targets of such abuses and the type of repressive tactics used by the government (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). International human rights treaties that prohibit many repressive tactics can shape individuals' perceptions of abuses and expectations of government conduct (Simmons 2009; Sikkink 2011; Conrad and Ritter 2017). These macro-level claims rely on assumptions about public opinion that have not been directly tested at the micro level. While important findings have been produced about public support for violence (Condra and Shapiro 2012; Piazza 2015), we are not aware of any study that has compared the public opinion effects of alternative forms of repression and dissent. Likewise, existing work demonstrates that knowledge of international law reduces public support for abuses (Wallace 2013; Chilton 2014, 2015; Chilton and Versteeg 2016), but has not analyzed whether these effects depend on the types of abuses or the tactics used by their targets.

We seek to further our understanding of the conditions under which publics approve or disapprove of human rights abuses by conducting a series of survey experiments. Our experimental design allows us to test the effects on public approval of human rights abuses with respect to three competing factors: (1) differing opposition tactics; (2) differing forms of government repression; and (3) information about international law. Recent survey experiments about the effects of international institutions have been conducted mostly in the United States, which does not allow us to understand whether such effects differ in other countries. We therefore fielded our experiment in India, Israel, and Argentina. This multi-country approach allows us to investigate whether the factors that affect public attitudes toward repression vary depending on the particular national context.

Our most consistent finding is that individuals are more likely to approve of human rights abuses when such abuses are conducted in response to a violent opposition movement. This implies that governments have greater leeway when responding to violent movements in terms of reactions by their publics. Inversely, this relationship also implies that non-violent opposition groups gain an advantage in the sense that governments may be relatively more limited in their choices when responding to such movements. The finding provides important micro-level support for arguments about the relative effectiveness of non-violent movements (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). A second key finding is that the effect of international law is not consistent and, indeed, may be more context-specific than many general theories imply. While we find that information of the government violating international law reduces approval in India, as many existing theories would suggest, it may actually *increase* approval in Israel, suggesting a potential public backlash to international institutions in certain contexts.

This paper makes several contributions to our understanding of the relationship between human rights abuses and public opinion. First, we provide empirical tests of the micro-foundations underlying existing theories of the repression-dissent nexus and the effects of international human rights law. Second, because our experimental design includes variation in terms of both opposition and government tactics, we are able to both test the effects of individual tactics against each other, and to test the effects of pairs of tactics in combination with each other. Third, ours is the first study that analyzes the effects of international law on public opinion in the context of contentious politics, the very context in which most human rights abuses take place. Finally, by comparing results across multiple countries, we provide insights regarding which determinants of public support for human rights abuses may be more context-specific than others.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we briefly discuss existing work on public support for human rights abuses. In Section 3, we develop a series of hypotheses about the effects on public opinion of opposition tactics, government repression, and international law. Section 4 describes our survey experiment design, while Section 5 presents the empirical results. Section 6 offers conclusions, implications, and directions for future work.

2. Public Support for Human Rights Abuses

This paper builds on the literatures on the repression-dissent nexus and international law, which each attempt to understand human rights abuses. Both literatures have increasingly

emphasized the importance of public opinion and the need to better understand its role in government decision making.

2.1 Repression and Dissent

Does public approval of human rights abuses depend on the tactics used by governments and opposition groups? Scholars have long recognized the close relationship between repression and dissent (Tilly 1978; Davenport 2007; Ritter 2014). Opposition groups seeking to challenge the state can choose among different forms of collective action and different tactics (Tilly 1978). In turn, governments choose from a repertoire of tactics with which they can respond to opposition movements (Mason and Krane 1989). Analyzing the relationship between these choices, scholars have often focused on the distinction between violent and non-violent approaches taken by opposition movements (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

Although sometimes overlooked, the role of the public is crucial in the repression-dissent nexus. Opposition movements seek to attract new supporters, which underscores the importance of the effect of dissent and repression on individuals outside the movement (Mason and Krane 1989; Mason 1996). DeNardo (1985) notes, for example, that “[w]hen demonstrators become the victims of brutal repression, their movement often gains sympathy and even material support from people who have not suffered directly from the government’s excesses” (p. 191). How the government chooses to respond to an opposition can likewise affect mass support for the government (Mason 1996). Nonetheless, public preferences are often assumed based on wider collective outcomes, such as the relative success of the opposing sides in meeting their objectives.

A series of studies has therefore sought to examine the relationship between human rights abuses and public opinion. Opp and Roehl (1990) conduct an opinion survey on the relationship

between recent police repression and political attitudes among opponents of nuclear power in Germany. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2002) focus on the relationships between levels of repression and public perception of human rights abuses, while Davis et al. (2012) analyze the relationship between the activities of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and public opinion toward human rights. Recent studies have also examined the extent to which individuals support the use of torture (Gronke et al. 2010; Richards et al. 2012; Piazza 2015) and the effects of wartime tactics on civilians' views of combatants (Berman et al. 2011; Condra and Shapiro 2012).

While we have learned much from this recent research, a few limitations are important to keep in mind. While theory suggests opposition groups and governments both choose among differing tactics, existing work has not captured the effects of these choices. In assessing the consequences of a given government or opposition tactic, it is crucial to consider the potential implications of available alternatives. Yet studies tend to concentrate on public attitudes toward either a particular type of repression (e.g., torture), or to a particular type of dissent (e.g., violent conflict). For example, in Piazza's (2015) important study of the effects of an opposition group's religious identity on public support for torture, all of the opposition groups are identified as employing violent tactics. The available evidence, therefore, does not allow us to systematically analyze the conditions under which the public is more likely to approve of human rights abuses.

2.2 International Law

Does international law affect public support for human rights abuses? A vast literature has examined the relationship between international law and repression. Recent studies find that joining human rights treaties can lead to improvements in human rights practices (Simmons

2009; Hill 2010; Conrad and Ritter 2013, 2017; Fariss 2014), but these effects are conditional on mechanisms such as domestic and transnational activism, independent domestic courts, and domestic legislatures (Simmons 2009; Hill et al. 2013; Lupu 2015).

Human rights treaties also constrain governments by affecting public opinion. Simmons (2009: 139-144) argues that joining human rights treaties can affect compliance with such treaties via a public opinion mechanism, i.e., that public opposition toward abuses can increase after a treaty is joined, thus facilitating mobilization. Similarly, Sikkink (2011) has argued that international law can shape the public's perceptions of which policies are appropriate and included within the state's rightful sovereign powers. Most recently, Conrad and Ritter (2017) have argued that human rights treaties change individuals' expectations of how governments will act when faced with mobilized dissent. These insights have spawned a recent wave of research that uses survey experiments to directly test the relationship between repression, human rights treaties, and public opinion (Chilton 2014, 2015; Chilton and Versteeg 2016). This work joins a broader literature analyzing the relationship between international institutions and public opinion (Chaudoin 2014, 2016).

While important progress has been made by recent survey experiments, this recent work does not systematically interrogate differences either in repression or dissent tactics. Much of it focuses solely on wartime contexts and other situations of highly violent conduct by both sides (e.g., Chilton 2014, 2015; Chilton and Versteeg 2016). The key treatment in these experiments is the provision of knowledge that the government violated human rights law. Yet respondents were not provided information about the dissent tactics that may have preceded the government's use of repression. Thus, like many observational studies, existing experimental work does not fully consider the extent to which the effects of international law may be conditional on the

varied tactical choices of both governments and opposition groups. In addition, existing survey experiments on the effects of international law have mostly been conducted in the United States, leaving open the question of whether individuals in other countries would respond similarly.

3. Theoretical Expectations

The degree to which individuals support government abuses of human rights reflects the relative importance of two sets of competing concerns. The first is the extent to which individuals believe that such abuses are necessary, or at least justified, to safeguard a society from threats. The willingness of individuals to support human rights abuses depends, in part, on those individuals' understanding of *why* their leaders have chosen to act in certain ways, including the events to which the government is reacting. The second is the extent to which individuals value justice and compliance with law. They thus evaluate government actions in accordance with those standards. The relative salience between security and justice often leads individuals to make difficult trade-offs when weighing these contesting considerations (Davis and Silver 2004). The hypotheses we develop below are intended to reflect these competing concerns.

3.1 Violence and Non-violence

We turn first to considering how the tactics used by opposition groups and governments may affect public support for the government. Both government and opposition tactics can vary along many dimensions. Historical expressions of discontent with the government include actions as varied as food riots, machine breaking, labor strikes, protests, guerrilla warfare, assassinations, and even revolution. Opposition groups who have taken up arms to address their grievances with the government through means of violence, such as the Shining Path in Peru or Renamo in Mozambique (Weinstein 2007), have attracted significant attention. Other

movements have instead relied on a more non-violent approach emphasizing peaceful disruption through mass demonstrations, work stoppages, and other tactics (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

Likewise, governments choose from a “menu” of actions designed to coerce and/or weaken oppositions, which can vary greatly in their degree of violence. These can include non-violent repression such as restricting speech, limiting Internet access, and closing media outlets; or violent repression such as arbitrary arrests, torture, and mass killings.

We focus on the general distinction between non-violent and violent tactics. The overarching choice between violence and non-violence is a key decision that governmental and non-governmental actors each face. The choice of violence or non-violence has been shown to have a tremendous impact on the extent to which actors achieve their goals (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011), but also has implications for the public’s response and evaluation.

Looking first at opposition tactics, a long line of research across several different subfields suggests that violence by non-governmental groups is associated with strengthened domestic support for the attacked regime (Mueller 1973: 209). Such violence can activate deep fear in the public, helping the ruling regime rally support in order to maintain and even consolidate power (Merolla and Zeichmeister 2009: 44). In their comparative study of opposition tactics, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011: 45) remark, “A ‘rally around the flag’ effect is more likely to occur when the adversary is confronted with violent resistance than with a disciplined nonviolent campaign that makes its commitment to nonviolent means known.” By contrast, they go on to note that non-violent opposition movements “engaged in civil resistance are more likely to appear as credible negotiating partners than are violent insurgents...” (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 11). This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (Opposition Violence): Violence by an opposition movement increases public support for the government.

Turning to the relationship between government tactics and public approval, much of the literature on repression suggests that governments can be punished domestically for resorting to violence. When observing their government's conduct toward an opposition group, individuals may make calculations not only about the consequences for that group, but also for future individual and collective actors, including themselves. While governments often provide important public goods and services, historically the biggest threat to life and liberty for citizens frequently comes from their own rulers (Rummel 1994: 3). Governments, both democratic and autocratic, ultimately rely on some form of consent from their subjects, but this consent is contingent on the perceived fairness of the government's conduct. Levi (1997: 16) highlights this conditional relationship, remarking that, "When citizens believe government actors promote immoral policies, have ignored their interests, or have actually betrayed them, citizens are unlikely to feel obligated to comply with the laws."

The resort to violence may be perceived as inherently illegitimate to domestic masses, especially in democratic systems where there is a presumption of restraint on the use of force in domestic affairs (Weart 1998: 90-93). Violent government actions can also make citizens question not only their loyalty to the ruling regime and whether it best serves their interests, but also more fundamentally its ability and willingness to protect them. Mason and Krane (1989: 176) argue, for example, that "as the level of repressive violence escalates and becomes more indiscriminate, the option of remaining uninvolved is eventually precluded because non-elites can no longer assure themselves of immunity from repression by simply remaining politically inert. Under such conditions, they can be induced to support rebel organizations by the promise

of protection from indiscriminate violence by the state.” Even if segments of the public do not flee into the arms of an opposition movement, violent repression can lead to ambivalence or outright disapproval of the political leadership.

Hypothesis 2 (Government Violence): Violent government repression against an opposition movement *decreases* support for the government.

3.2 International Law

We turn now to the ways in which international law may affect public support for the government within the context of dissent and repression. Perhaps the most consistent argument in recent work on the effects of international law is that such effects are conditional – on civil society, courts, and legislatures, among other factors. Underlying many of these arguments are claims and assumptions about the impact of international legal commitments on collective actors, particularly the public. Public opinion is a key mechanism by which human rights treaties may affect human rights practices. Over time, international law changes the range of government actions the public perceives as appropriate (Sikkink 2011). As the effects of normative mechanisms may take years to fully transform the public’s perceptions, others point in addition to less delayed mechanisms. Simmons (2009: 135-139) has argued that making human rights violations illegal increases popular disapproval of human rights abuses, raises the value individuals place on their rights, and thus facilitates mobilization to end such practices. Experimental studies show that, under various conditions, international law can shape public preferences in important ways (Chaudoin 2014). In particular, research by Wallace (2013) and Chilton (2015) indicates that information about commitments to international human rights law reduces individuals’ approval for the use of violent tactics by their governments. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3a (International Legal Constraints): Government violations of international human rights law *decrease* public support for the government.

Against this view of the promise of international legal constraints is an alternative perspective that international law could actually have counterproductive tendencies. The turn to legalization is not always perceived to be an unalloyed good, and can mobilize affected domestic interests in ways that can undermine, rather than further, intended policy outcomes (Goldstein and Martin 2000). Past work on the promotion of universal human rights norms points to the potential for a local backlash against outside edicts seeking to regulate what should be considered appropriate domestic conduct (Hafner-Burton 2013: 153-154). Likewise, efforts at international legalization can result in backlash effects from either the general public or political elites (Helfer 2002). This might especially be the case in a context in which the public has a negative baseline perception of international law, resulting either from the failure of international institutions to address local issues in the past and/or a perception that such institutions are biased.

An example of such an effect in recent empirical work can be found in Chapman and Chaudoin (2016). Using a survey experiment, they find that individuals in Kyrgyzstan who were told the International Criminal Court (ICC) had conducted investigations into violence in their country were less likely to approve of the Court than those who were not provided this information.¹ Work in political psychology has analyzed how exposure to information correcting or disconfirming preexisting beliefs and preferences can engender a “backfire effect,” where individuals hold onto those preexisting views even more strongly than they did before (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Beliefs over what the government should be allowed to do in the face

¹ Respondents in the control group were instead told of a non-specific hypothetical situation involving an ICC investigation that did not involve their own country.

of opposition threats is one such area where citizens may hold extremely strong views. The potential for international law to produce a backlash effect may thus be especially salient precisely in the context of the repression-dissent nexus.

Hypothesis 3b (International Legal Backlash): Government violations of international human rights law *increase* public support for the government.

4. **Research Design**

To test this set of hypotheses, we employ a series of survey experiments. This methodology has both advantages and limitations. The main strength of survey experiments in this context is random assignment to treatment. This allows us to compare groups of survey recipients that are similar to each other on average across both observed and unobserved factors. By comparing differences in responses between experimental groups, we can infer with greater certainty the causal effects of opposition tactics, government responses, and international law respectively. One of the key limitations of such designs concerns external validity, i.e., the extent to which the phenomena we observe are generalizable to other contexts (McDermott 2002). Individuals may react differently when taking a survey than they would when faced with a similar real-world situation. Survey experiments also necessarily reduce complex and often changing social phenomena to a limited set of information, treatments, and outcome items. Nevertheless, the benefits of an experimental approach outweigh the costs in the study of topics like the effects of international law and the repression-dissent nexus given the prevalence of contradictory findings in existing observational research, as well as the formidable obstacles posed by selection effects and issues of strategic interaction (Druckman et al. 2011). Although by no means the final word, an experimental design can provide a clearer test of the relationship between opposition tactics, government responses, and international law.

5.1 Survey Experiment Design

To test our hypotheses, we designed the following survey experiment. All respondents were first presented with the following introductory statement:

The following questions are about the [country name] government's relations with groups that oppose the government. Around the world, some opposition groups like the Scottish National Party or the World Wild Fund for Nature have taken more of a non-violent approach; others like the Irish Republican Army and the Earth Liberation Front have instead used violence. Different governments have, in turn, handled these sorts of groups in different ways. You will read about a situation our country has faced many times in the past and will probably face again. The situation is general, and is not about a specific opposition group in [country name] in the news today. We will describe one approach the government has taken, and ask whether you approve or disapprove.

In the design of both the opening prompt and the subsequent treatments, we sought to balance the contending concerns of richer vignettes incorporating details of specific cases versus the desire to engage survey respondents in ways that isolate general public attitudes toward opposition tactics, government responses, and international law (Morton and Williams 2010: 264-265). In the opening prompt, we include references to actual opposition movements that have previously employed either non-violent or violent tactics to heighten the salience and realism of the scenario. We drew examples from outside the countries in which we conducted our surveys to lessen the likelihood that respondents would associate the opposition group in the experimental treatment with a specific actor within their own country, which could have biased

their responses. In the experimental treatments, we did not name a specific opposition group.² An alternative approach would have been to name local opposition groups in each country. While this would have increased certain elements of realism, it would have made comparing results across countries more difficult.

The experimental component of the survey then involved randomly assigning respondents to additional pieces of information concerning the scenario based on three separate sets of treatments – opposition tactics, government response, and international law. The full text of the instrument is provided in the Appendix. First, to test the effects of violent versus non-violent opposition movements, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two statements below. In this paper, we refer to these statements as “Non-violent Opposition” and “Violent Opposition” respectively.³

1. *Non-violent Opposition:* An opposition group recently began challenging the [country name] government’s authority. Members of the opposition group have organized and conducted several protests and worker strikes.
2. *Violent Opposition:* An opposition group recently began challenging the [country name] government’s authority. Members of the opposition group have organized and conducted several attacks against civilians and government officials.

² In response to a follow-up question, the majority of Israelis unsurprisingly responded that they had believed the opposition group was Palestinian or Arab.

³ This is designed to be a conservative test of the difference between the experimental conditions. There is a possibility that respondents could infer that the protests or strikes conducted by the opposition were violent. To the extent this is the case, it would reduce our ability to detect an effect of the difference between the two experimental conditions.

Second, to test the effects of several government responses, respondents were then randomly provided one of the following two prompts outlining the subsequent actions taken by the government. In this paper, we refer to these conditions as the “Government Non-Violence” and “Government Violence” treatments, respectively.⁴

1. *Government Non-Violence*: “The government responded with significant restrictions on the media, such as newspapers and television stations, imposing curfews that require people to remain in their homes after dark, and restricting the ability of people to travel within and outside the country.”
2. *Government Violence*: “The government responded by arresting without charge, beating, and torturing suspected members of the opposition group.”

The two vignettes were chosen to reflect representative types of non-violent and violent actions available to governments from the repertoire of repression. The text for each vignette was designed to be as similar as possible *except* for tactics used in the government’s response.⁵

⁴ In the original instrument, we also included a third set of experimental groups in which respondents were told the government simply issued a statement condemning the actions of the opposition. However, given our theoretical emphasis on the type of government repression, we focus on the non-violent vs. violent distinction in government repression for the purposes of this paper.

⁵ One potential concern is that non-violent repression may be more likely to be viewed as more indiscriminate than violent repression. To address this, we asked respondents in our Israeli sample who they believed the opposition group consisted of. The answers to this question did not vary significantly across the experimental groups, suggesting that the inferred extent of (non)discrimination is not biasing the results.

Third, we varied respondents' exposure to information regarding their government's commitment to international law. Respondents in the relevant control condition for this treatment were given no additional prompt. Respondents in the treatment condition were given the following additional text:

International Law: "The government's actions violated international law. The government had previously signed international treaties that do not allow the use of these actions."⁶

This design choice is similar to that adopted in other survey experiments studying the consequences of international law (e.g., Chilton, 2015).⁷ Prohibitions against elements of both the non-violent and violent repressive policies are included in several international legal instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). For instance, media freedoms and freedom of expression are guaranteed (Art.19), as is freedom of

⁶ The international law treatment is purposely broad, rather than naming individual institutions. Our aim was to capture the effect of general attitudes toward international law, rather than those with respect to a specific institution. This is especially important because individuals may not have strong prior beliefs with respect to individual institutions and because backlash effects may instead be due to broad negative perceptions of international law and organizations.

⁷ One potential concern is that participants may simply be responding to the inclusion of an additional critical frame rather than the international legal content of this prompt. To evaluate this possibility, Chaudoin (2014) in his study of the effects of international law in the domain of trade policy also included a placebo group that received a generic critical prompt. However, he found the placebo was not significantly different from the control. In light of these prior findings, as well as to limit the total number of experimental groups in our study, we thus opted for a binary international law treatment.

movement (Art.12).⁸ Arresting individuals without charge is also not allowed (Art.9), and torture is similarly banned (Art. 7). Taken as a whole, the design involves a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design with a total of 8 experimental groups.⁹

After being presented with a given version of the scenario based on each of the three treatments, respondents were asked to answer questions about the government's handling of the situation. The "Approval" item represents the main outcome of interest because it allows us to directly evaluate differences in respondents' approval of the government across various combinations of the opposition tactics, government response, and international law.¹⁰ To further probe possible mechanisms underlying respondents' approval or disapproval of the government, we asked a series of follow-up questions tapping into such considerations as evaluations of the government's competence, the effectiveness of the government's policy in improving domestic

⁸ For the full text of the ICCPR, see <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.

⁹ One additional concern in surveys is the relative attentiveness of respondents to the survey in general and the experimental assignments in particular. We thus incorporated a general "Screener" attentiveness item (Berinsky et al., 2014), as well as series of manipulation checks for each of the three treatments. Across all of these items, respondents demonstrated a high level of attention and correct identification of the treatment conditions to which they were exposed.

¹⁰ As discussed further below, randomization allows us to make more reliable inferences that any differences in approval are caused by the treatments rather than any pre-treatment differences between experimental groups, such as on general support for the government.

security, implications for the country's international reputation, the morality of the government's approach, and the extent of the threat posed by the opposition.¹¹

1. *Approval*: Do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way the government handled the situation? (5=Strongly approve; 4=somewhat approve; 3=neither approve nor disapprove; 2=somewhat disapprove; 1=strongly disapprove).
2. *Security*: How much do you think the government's handling of the situation will help or hurt the country's security? (5=Help a lot; 4=help somewhat; 3=neither help nor hurt; 2=somewhat hurt; 1=hurt a lot).
3. *Competence*: In the scenario we described earlier, how would you describe the government's competence? (5=Very competent; 4=somewhat competent; 3=neither competent nor incompetent; 2=somewhat incompetent; 1=very incompetent).
4. *International Reputation*: How much do you think the government's actions will help or hurt the country's reputation in the world? (5=Help a lot; 4=help somewhat; 3=neither help nor hurt; 2=somewhat hurt; 1=hurt a lot).
5. *Morality*: Do you think the way the government handled the situation is, or is not, morally acceptable? (1=yes, it is morally acceptable; 0=no, it is not morally acceptable).
6. *Threat*: How much of a threat do you think the opposition group poses to the government? (1= Very threatening/somewhat threatening; 0= Not very threatening/Not at all threatening).

¹¹ The sequencing of the follow-up items was randomized to guard against possible order effects.

4.2 Countries

We fielded this survey experiment across three countries – India, Israel, and Argentina. While many theories implicitly or explicitly make assumptions that the effects of dissent, repression, and international law are universally applicable, a multi-country design allows us to directly evaluate whether or not such relationships may be contingent on national contexts. We chose these specific countries based on several criteria. First, they are all democratic, and thus levels of public approval of government are likely to be more salient. Second, all three countries have experienced significant non-violent and violent opposition movements, as well as variation in government responses. Although presented with a hypothetical scenario, respondents are thus more likely to view the conditions as more realistic than in many other countries where particular types of opposition movements or government policies are far less attributable or relevant. Third, while these three countries are similar in the ways described above, their differences in terms of their histories of human rights abuses and public attitudes toward international law allow us to analyze how support for human rights abuses depends on national context.

India was home to the Ghandi-led independence movement, which is widely regarded as one of the most successful non-violence campaigns of the twentieth century. Yet, alongside this history of non-violence, the country has also been affected by a number of armed insurgencies and ethnic violence. The Indian government has likewise responded in ways both constrained and less restrained when addressing a variety of challenges to its authority. While India has been home to several secondary conflicts, its primary internal conflict has reflected Hindu-Muslim rivalries dating back at least to its independence.

Israel has experienced a series of high-profile violent and non-violent movements. From the First Intifada, which began as a non-violent or low-scale-violence movement to the Second

Intifada, which included numerous fatal suicide bombings, to the more recent “Silent Intifada” or “Stabbing Intifada,” Palestinian groups have confronted the Israeli regime using a broad range of tactics. While the history of conflict in Israel is certainly complex, it largely centers on a rivalry between Jews and Arabs.

Argentina has likewise experienced a series of violent and non-violent confrontations between the government and opposition groups in recent decades. During the Dirty War of the 1970s and 1980s, the government infamously conducted wide-scale human rights abuses, including torture, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. For decades, the non-violent Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo held regular demonstrations to protest these abuses. Yet opposition groups have often also taken to the use of violence, including the guerrilla movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the deadly protests during the financial crisis of 2001. Unlike Israel and India, Argentina has not experienced a highly salient decades-long internal ethnic conflict; by contrast, the most highly publicized human rights abuses in Argentina (during the Dirty War) were directed at the core of Argentine society rather than an ethnic out-group.

International law is an especially salient political and social issue in all three countries. Compared to other democracies, India has been somewhat less willing to join international human rights and related institutions; it has not joined the ICC and has not ratified the Convention against Torture. Israel has had an especially contentious relationship with international law and organizations. This include the disproportionately large number of U.N. General Assembly resolutions regarding Israel, past claims by international legal experts that Israeli leader Ariel Sharon should be indicted for crimes against humanity, and international legal controversies surrounding Israel’s settlement policy and the construction of the West Bank Barrier. This history has led to the widespread perception among Israelis that international

institutions are biased against Israel.¹² Israel is therefore a candidate country for testing whether international law can have a backlash effect in terms of public support for human rights abuses. International law has also been especially salient in Argentinean society in recent decades, including as part of the human rights and transitional justice movements that followed the Dirty War. All three countries have joined the ICCPR.

We fielded the Indian survey in March-April 2015. The sample consisted of 796 respondents, aged 18 and over. The survey experiment was conducted online using Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk).¹³ In the U.S. context, mTurk has been shown to produce comparable results to studies using more representative national samples (Berinsky et al. 2012). A number of studies have employed Indian samples (e.g. Bernauer et al. 2014). Our sample has some important limitations as it may not be representative of the Indian population as a whole, but the results are nonetheless likely to be informative. The India mTurk sample tends to have a higher level of education, a greater interest in politics, and higher levels of political participation than

¹² A common saying in Israel is “Um Shmum”. “Um” is the acronymic pronunciation of “U.N.” in Hebrew, and the “shm” prefix is intended to express disdain or dismissal (e.g., “Joe Shmoe” in American English). The phrase is so commonly used it was quoted by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 1998.

¹³ Participants were paid US\$0.40 for completing the survey. All surveys were conducted in English given the wide range of languages spoken in India. This follows the standard practice of other studies using mTurk with Indian samples (Bernauer et al., 2014).

the wider India population.¹⁴ The results from the survey experiment thus offer a window into the attitudes of that segment of the population most likely to be aware of government-opposition relations, as well as more willing and able to hold the government accountable.

We fielded the Israel survey in May 2015. The sample consisted of a nationally representative sample of 1,292 Jewish respondents, aged 18-64. The survey experiment was conducted online using the Midgam Project Web Panel, a private polling company that administers Internet surveys in Israel for both commercial and academic clients.¹⁵ To conduct this survey, we translated our instrument to Hebrew.

Lastly, we fielded the Argentina survey in November-December 2015. The sample consisted of 1,096 adult respondents, aged 18 and over. The experiment was conducted through face-to-face interviews as part of the Argentina Panel Election Study, which surveyed a nationally representative sample of Argentine voters living in cities of 10,000 inhabitants or more (Lupu et al. 2015).¹⁶ To conduct this survey, we translated our instrument to Spanish.

Table 1 provides the number of respondents assigned to each experimental group in each country. We included a battery of socio-demographic and political attitudes items interspersed both before and after the experimental portion of the survey. The Appendix provides additional

¹⁴ Comparison benchmark data comes from recent series of the National Election Studies administered by the Lokniti Research Center, available at <http://www.lokniti.org/national-election-studies.php>.

¹⁵ For further information, see <http://www.midgampanel.com/research/en/index.asp>. Respondents were paid 2.5 New Shekels each for completing the survey.

¹⁶ Inclusion of post-stratification weights does not substantially alter the results.

descriptive statistics regarding the three samples. As expected, randomization ensured that respondents in each experimental group were similar across a range of baseline covariates that are generally associated with individual attitudes toward repression and international law.¹⁷ The balance evident across groups thus gives us greater confidence that any differences in attitudes are due to the treatments rather than other underlying individual factors.

Table 1: Experimental Groups

Opposition Tactics	Government Response				
	Non-violent Repression		Violent Repression		
	No IL	IL	No IL	IL	
Non-violent	India	101	94	107	100
	Israel	164	163	170	170
	Argentina	121	132	151	151
Violent	India	102	102	92	98
	Israel	171	149	140	165
	Argentina	121	130	137	153

Total sample sizes: India 796, Israel 1,292, Argentina 1,096

5. Results and Discussion

Our Indian respondents reported the highest overall levels of approval of their government, whereas our Argentine respondents reported the lowest levels of approval. There is little reason for us to believe, however, that this finding reflects any of our experimental treatments; it is more likely due to prior beliefs about the respondents' governments at the times our surveys were

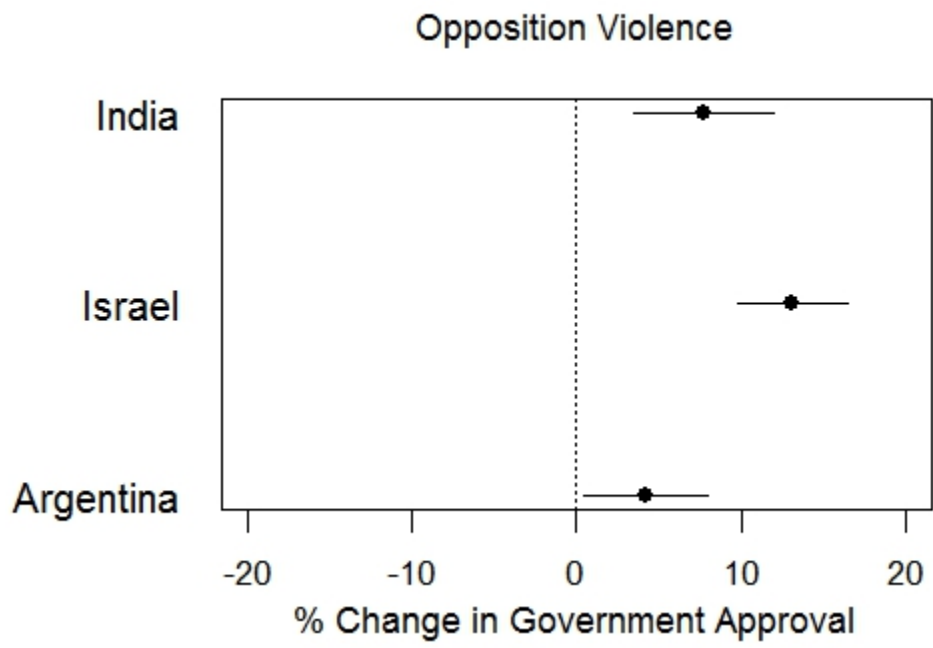
¹⁷ We conducted an extensive series of balance tests. Results are provided in the Appendix.

fielded. The Appendix provides summary statistics regarding the levels of approval in our samples and summarizes the correlations between approval and the other follow-up items.

Turning to the tests of our hypotheses, we present the results of several difference-of-means tests.¹⁸ For each country, Figure 1 reports the results of tests comparing approval levels among both of the opposition tactics experimental conditions. Each value represents the first difference in percentage point terms between the opposition treatment (violent) versus control (non-violent) groups. In all three countries, we find consistent support for H1, indicating that individuals are more likely to approve of government repression when opposition groups are violent, all else equal. The estimate of the effect size is largest in Israel (an increase in approval of about 15%) and smallest in Argentina (an increase in approval of about 5%). Given the differences in the historical context of the 3 countries, the consistency of this finding is especially striking and provides strong support for the notion that non-violent opposition groups enjoy important advantages.

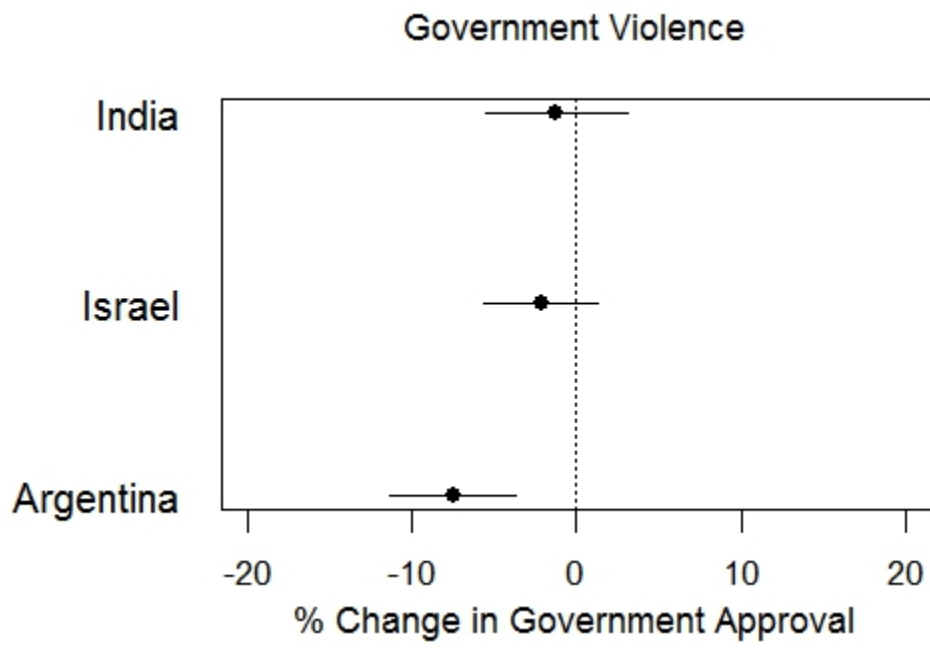
¹⁸ For ease of presentation, we rescaled the values for the approval outcome variable to range between 0 and 1, so that effect sizes indicate first differences in the percentage change in approval for the government.

Figure 1: Change in Government Approval – Opposition Violence



We test the effects of government repression in each country by comparing levels of government approval among respondents who were told the government responded with violent repression to those who were told the government responded with non-violent repression. As reported in Figure 2, our estimates of this effect are all negative, indicating decreased support for governments that respond violently, although this effect is significant only in Argentina. As noted above, Argentina differs from India and Israel in the sense that, historically, the most notorious human rights abuses in Argentine history have targeted broad sectors of society, especially during the Dirty War. This historical context might explain why our Argentine respondents were sensitive to the use of government violence. In Israel, by contrast, most government violence has historically been targeted at Arabs, whereas respondents in our sample were all Jewish. India is in some ways a more complex case because the country has experienced multiple internal conflicts, although the broad conflict between Hindus and Muslims is likely the most salient. Our respondents' relative insensitivity to government violence may be due to the fact that only 64 of our respondents in the Indian sample were Muslims.

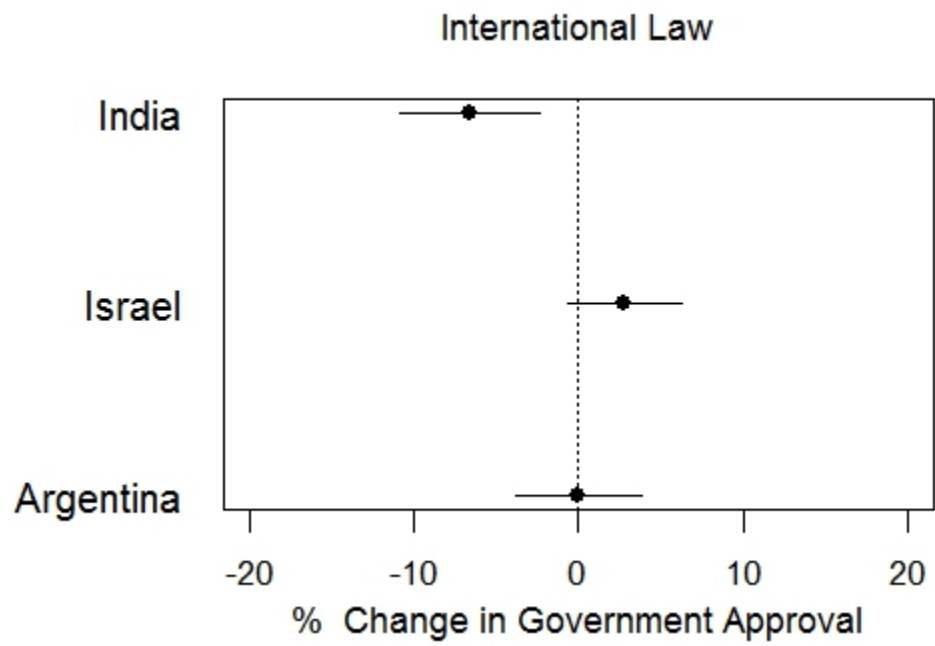
Figure 2: Change in Government Approval – Government Violence



Finally, we compared approval levels between respondents who were told their government violated international law to those who were not provided this information. As Figure 3 demonstrates, our results indicate remarkably different effects across countries. In India, respondents who were told their government violated international law were significantly less likely to approve of the government. Our estimate of this effect in Argentina, however, is very close to zero. At the other extreme, our estimate of the effect of international law on Israeli respondents is an actual *increase* in the level of government approval. While this effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p=0.054$), it is worth noting.¹⁹ It may be the case that the reactions of our Israeli respondents reflect a backlash against international law, which may be due to the many controversies involving international law in Israel. While this effect may be relatively unique to the Israeli context, it does provide support for the possibility of such a backlash effect. This suggests the need for additional theorizing in future work that specifies the conditions under which international law can reduce versus increase support for human rights abuses.

¹⁹ The p-value of this estimate *is* smaller than 0.05 in the alternative specifications we report in the Appendix.

Figure 3: Change in Government Approval – International Law



We also tested our hypotheses using a series of OLS and ordered probit models, which also included common socio-demographic covariates. As reported in the Appendix, the results of these models are consistent with the difference-of-means tests reported above. We also tested for whether the treatment effects of opposition violence and international law varied across respondents' demographics characteristics. As reported in the Appendix, we did not find any statistically significant heterogeneous treatment effects with respect to either treatment in any of our samples.

5.1 Conditional Effects of International Law

We continue our analysis by examining whether the effects of the international law treatment are conditional on opposition and government tactics. The effects of international law are known to be conditional, but existing work has not tested whether such effects depend on the tactics of repression and dissent. To capture this, we estimated the first difference associated with the international law treatment for each of the four non-violence/violence experimental conditions in each country.²⁰ Figure 4 reports the results.

The results reveal some interesting findings concerning the strengths, as well as limitations, of international law in shaping public attitudes toward human rights abuses. In India, the estimated effect of the international law treatment is negative for all four groups, but is only significant when the opposition is non-violent and the government responds with violence. While it seems intuitive that individuals would be less likely to approve of such a response by their government, it is less obvious why they should be even less likely to do so when told the

²⁰ All values were estimated using the *Clarify* software package. Each estimate was calculated with the other relevant treatment variables set to 0, and all other background covariates to their median values.

government violated international law. The result suggests that the international law treatment in this group may have caused this effect by reinforcing or strengthening underlying notions that the government response was unjust or illegitimate.

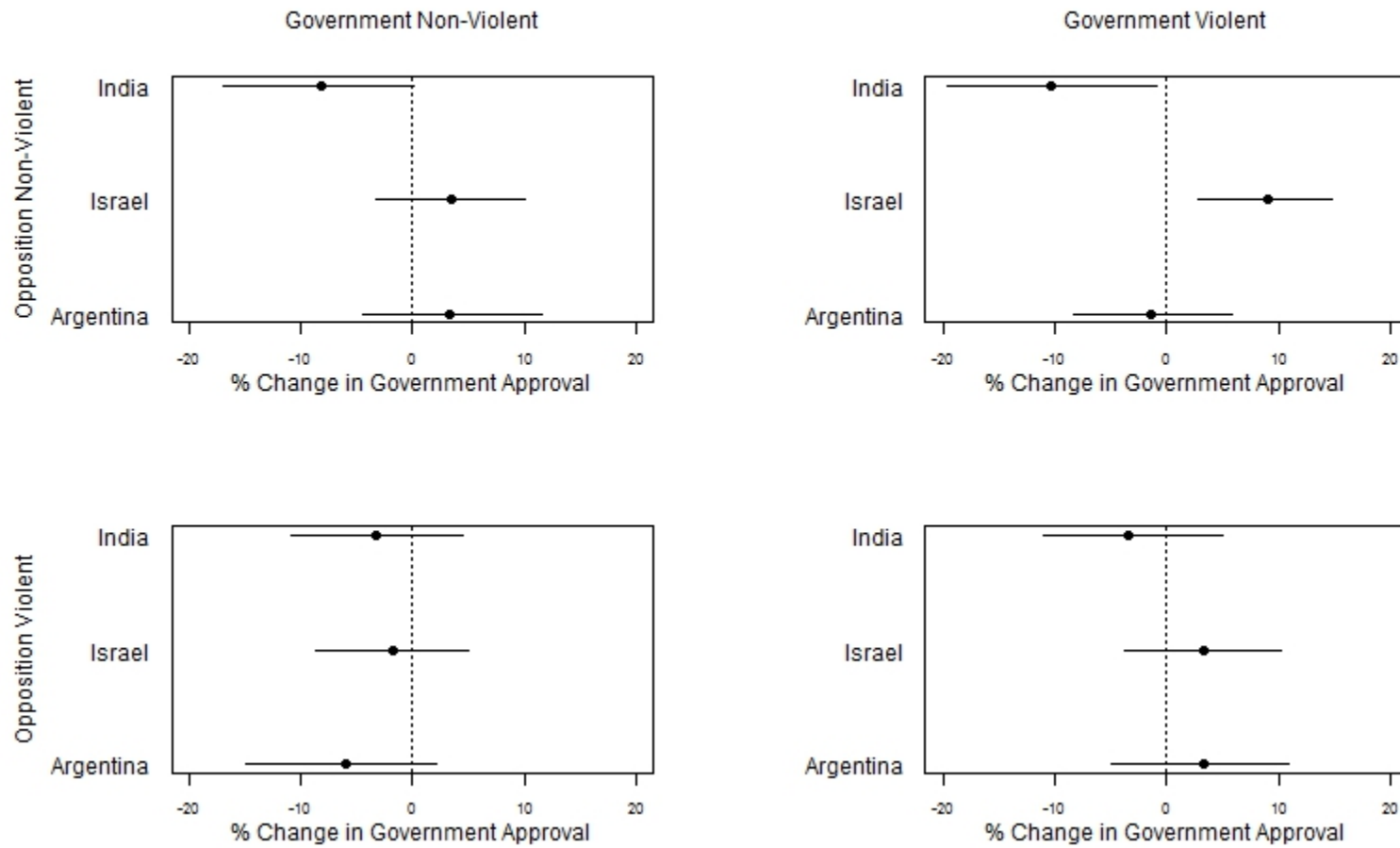
Interestingly, the effect of the international law treatment is also significant in the same group in the Israeli sample, but in the *opposite* direction. When told the Israeli government responded to non-violence with violence, our respondents were more likely to approve of the government's response when told it violated international law. This appears to be consistent with a backlash effect, i.e., that Israeli respondents may not perceive of international law as legitimate and thus view the information that the government violated such law as a signal that the government must have had an important and justifiable reason to respond as it did.²¹ It is also possible that Israelis have a more negative perception of non-violent movements given that the initially non-violent First Intifada later turned increasingly violent.

In our Argentina sample, the effect of the international law treatment is not significant in any of our subsamples. One interpretation of this result is that, in the context of conflict and the other concerns that come with it, Argentines may not have been sensitive to the international legality of repression. An alternative explanation may be that Argentine subjects who were not informed that the government violated international law already had such information, resulting in a weak treatment. While we cannot rule out this possibility, we note that the same treatment

²¹ For a similar finding in the U.S. context, see Chilton and Versteeg (2016: 4): "It is possible that informing respondents that government officials are advocating for using interrogation techniques including torture despite the fact that it would violate international law and the constitution sends a signal that these officials have particularly good reasons for wanting to use torture in that instance."

had significant effects in our other samples in India (with a highly educated subsample of the population) and Israel (where knowledge of law and politics is relatively high).

Figure 4: The Effect of International Law on Government Approval, Conditional on Opposition Tactics and Government Response



5.2 Causal Mediation Analysis

While the preceding discussion clarifies the conditions under which members of the public support or oppose the use of violence by their governments, additional analysis can help uncover the possible reasons *why* they may form these evaluations. We continue our analysis by examining the causal mediators of our results. To do so, we use the methodology proposed by Imai et al. (2011). Our candidate causal mediators are the follow-up questions included in our survey, which are intended to probe some of the most likely rationales for our respondents' responses: security, government competence, international reputation, morality, and opposition threat.²² Each of these factors may be mediating the effects of the treatments on our main outcome of interest concerning government approval.

For each potential mediator, we estimated a model with the mediator as the dependent variable – linear models for the ordered security, competence, and reputation measures; and logit models for the binary morality and threat variables. For each potential mediator, we also estimated a linear outcome model with approval as the dependent variable. We included the same controls included in the models reported in Table 2. We report this analysis for two treatments – opposition violence and international law – because our results generally indicated the other treatments did not have causal effects in most of the samples.

Figures 5 and 6 show the results of the causal mediation analysis.²³ With respect to the effects of opposition violence, security and government competence are significant and positive

²² The morality and threat follow-up questions were not included in the Argentina survey due to time constraints.

²³ The Appendix reports the proportion of observations mediated by each mediator.

causal mediators in India and Israel. Substantively, this means that a significant part of why respondents were more likely to approve of governments responding to violent oppositions is that they viewed such responses as being necessary for the maintenance of security and as an indication that the government was competent. Reputation, by contrast, is a significant causal mediator in Argentina, indicating that underlying causal mechanisms behind the effects of opposition violence may differ by country. In the Israel sample, but not in India, both morality and threat are also significant causal mediators. This suggests that the Israeli respondents viewed a repressive response to a violent opposition as a moral choice and viewed such an opposition as a fundamental threat to the state.

With respect to the international law treatment, we did not analyze the Argentina sample, where the treatment effect was clearly not significant. Here, again, the causal mediators differed by country. In India, concerns about security, competence, reputation, and morality all mediated the negative effect of the international law treatment. In Israel, however, none of these variables was a significant causal mediator, suggesting that these issues do not underlie the apparent backlash effect we observe in our Israel sample. The combined results thus point to the importance of testing theories of international law and the repression-dissent nexus across multiple national contexts, because not only can treatment effects differ but also the underlying factors mediating those effects.²⁴

²⁴ The Appendix reports the results of additional causal mediation tests in which multiple mediators are included in the outcome models. The results of these tests do not differ substantially from those reported above.

Figure 5: Causal Mediation – Opposition Violence

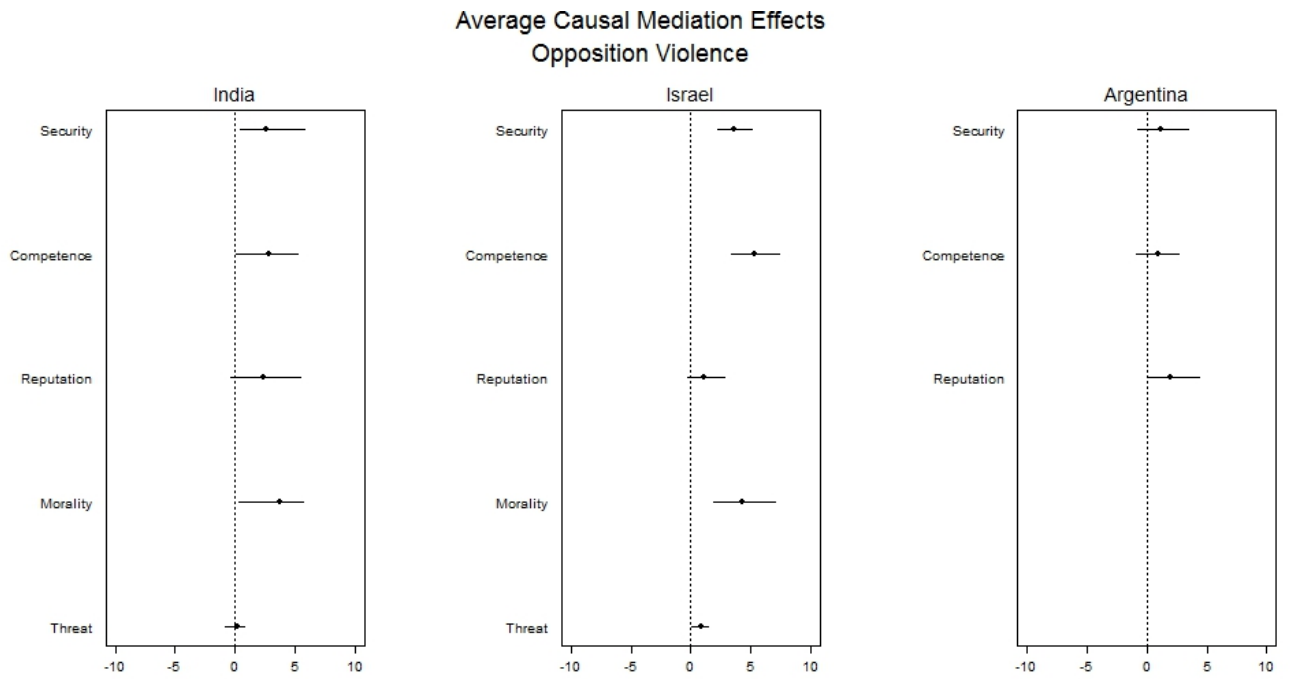
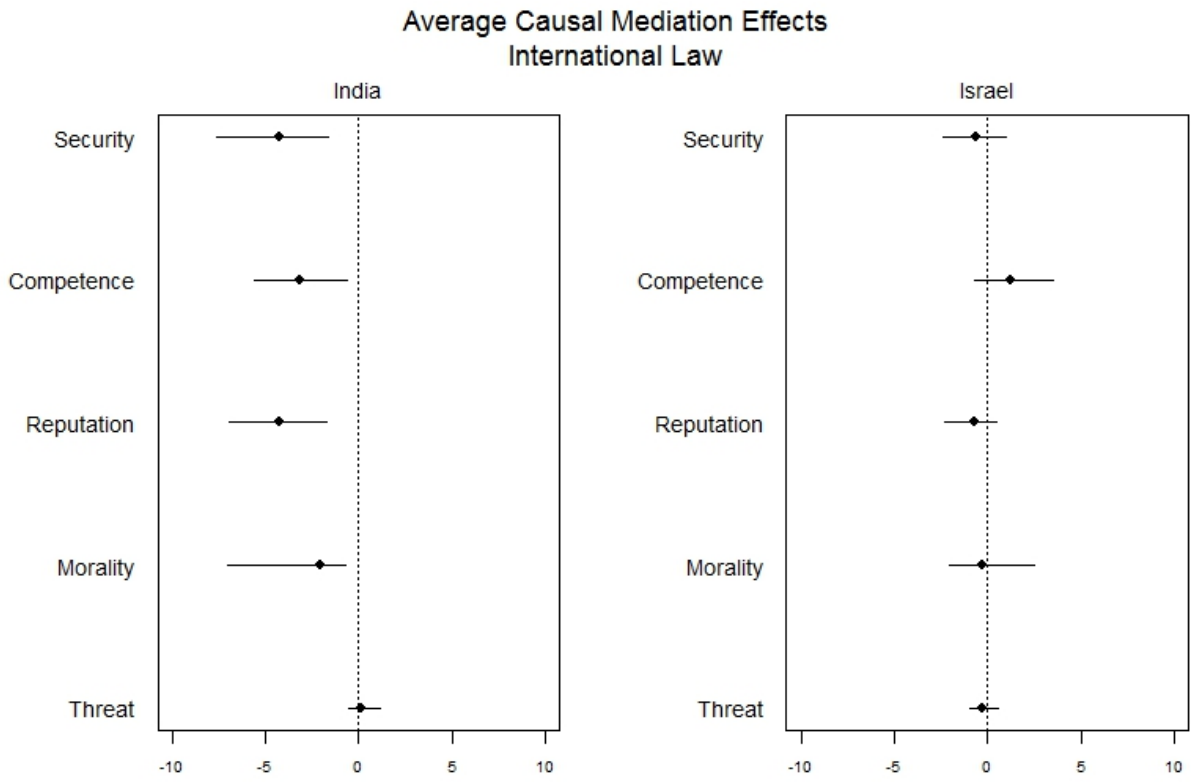


Figure 7: Causal Mediation – International Law



6. Conclusions

This paper has sought to shed light on the relationship between human rights abuses and public opinion. This relationship is clearly a complex one, and our research design has attempted to account for some of the possible dimensions that make the systematic analysis of such relationships so difficult. Specifically, our design allows us to understand when publics are more or less likely to oppose or condone human rights abuses while taking into account differences in opposition tactics, government repressive tactics, and information about international legal commitments under multiple national contexts.

Read together, our findings suggest that concerns about protection from violent opposition groups may be more consistently important for individuals in different national contexts than concerns about the appropriateness or legality of human rights abuses. Our most consistent result is that, when opposition groups are violent, this leads to significant increases in support for human rights abuses. Our causal mediation analysis suggests that, at least in Israel and India, part of the reason for this is a concern with public security. In addition, while morality seemed to have played a role as well, the direction of the effect suggests respondents may have considered it a moral imperative for the government to respond to violence with human rights abuses. This is a troubling and striking result given the extent to which both human rights scholarship and advocacy focus on the immorality of such abuses; in some contexts, individuals may view the government's moral duty as being to conduct, rather than refrain from, such abuses. Normative concerns do not inherently lead to support for restrained conduct, and can actually be used to justify more aggressive policies (Kertzer et al. 2014).

By contrast, we find weaker support for the notion that concerns about legality reduce support for human rights abuses. While theory suggests that international human rights law

works, at least in part, by reducing public support for abuses, we find that support for this proposition depends on the national context. Information about international law had this effect on respondents in our India survey, yet in Israel it likely had the opposite effect, and in Argentina our estimate of this effect is close to zero. These findings suggest that broad theories about the relationship between international law and public opinion may require refinement, focusing on the conditions under which a backlash effect may be more, or less, likely to occur.

Our results offer several additional implications. First, our findings are consistent with arguments made by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) and others about the tactical advantages of non-violent oppositions. While their study provides observational data to indicate that such movements are more likely to be successful, they do not directly test whether this may be due in part to public opinion effects. Our results complement their research by showing that publics are less likely to approve of government repression when an opposition movement is non-violent. While, as Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) argue, non-violence provides other benefits, our result indicates that a public opinion constraint on the government may be an important advantage of groups that pursue these types of tactics.

In turn, our findings indirectly point to the importance of framing. We presented our respondents with short, simple descriptions of the tactics used by the opposition movements and governments. In real contexts, individuals receive this information from many, often biased, sources. Governments often attempt to provoke non-violent protesters to use violence; our results suggest that, when governments succeed in doing so, the public may allow the government more leeway to strike back. Likewise, when confronted with large-scale peaceful demonstrations, governments often engage in an anti-human-rights discourse and attempt to frame the opposition as “terrorists” in order to justify and induce their agents to repress

opposition groups. Such strategies of framing a situation as one of maintaining security do not necessarily work – as exemplified by the failures of incumbent leaders to successfully deploy such strategies in Ukraine during the 2004 Orange Revolution, or in Egypt during the 2011 uprising – yet our results indicate that individuals have these concerns in mind when evaluating government abuses. The more control such governments have over information, the better they may be able to frame such conflicts and manipulate public opinion in their favor accordingly.

This paper offers a number of avenues for further inquiry, especially as related to the relationship between human rights abuses and public opinion that have been suggested by existing work. Several components of the scenario were fixed to reduce the complexity of the survey. One of the potentially most fruitful components to relax would be the circumstances that led the opposition to select a particular set of tactics, or to allow for a change in tactics as the scenario unfolds. As was discussed earlier, choices by the opposition (as well as the government) from the menu of available options are not made in isolation from other actors, or expectations of how mass audiences will react. Second, varying jointly the effects of discriminate versus indiscriminate killing by both opposition groups and governments could help provide individual-level foundations for theories about the consequences of forms of violence that differ in their extent of discrimination. Third, while our existing work has focused on international legal violations by governments, recent work suggests that opposition groups, especially organized rebellions, may strategically choose to comply with the laws of war to gain legitimacy (Jo, 2015). While this study focused on states as the main agents for international legal commitments, future work could examine how non-state actor commitments affect public approval of such groups in an experimental setting. Finally, while we rely on a straightforward binary international law treatment, other research points to potentially complex effects of different

elements in the legalization of an international commitment on mass attitudes (Abbott et al. 2000; Wallace 2013). A more fine-grained set of international law treatments could help uncover how specific institutional design elements might influence public attitudes toward human rights and the repression-dissent nexus.

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