

Can Entertainment Media Undermine Dictatorships? Evidence from Brazil's Novelas

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Abstract

The role played by mass media in the rise and maintenance of non-democratic regimes is a phenomenon well documented in the political economic literature. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Rede Globo, the main television broadcaster in Brazil served the military regime that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985 by distorting the news. The theoretical literature on media capture, however, suggest that media outlets might face a more complicated trade-off: when media outlets bias news to serve autocracies, individuals might disengage from watching TV and advertising revenues decrease. This naturally creates an incentive for media outlets to invest in more appealing entertainment shows. This paper investigates if entertainment TV can undermine the support for autocratic regimes when dissenting views permeate entertainment shows. This is done by examining whether the entry of Globo TV and its *novelas* induced changes in the vote share of the ruling party during Brazilian dictatorship in mayoral elections held between 1972 and 1982. We employ a Difference-in-difference strategy exploiting variation in the timing of Globo's entry across municipalities. We also exploit variation in *novelas* content over time interacted with differential entry of Globo to test whether *novelas* with political messages account for changes in vote shares. Our results show that on average, entry of Globo in a municipality is associated with a decrease on ARENA's vote-share in mayoral elections. We also provide evidence that suggests that the increased use of political messages in *novelas* over time accounts for part of the effect.