

# Increased but Insincere Support? New Evidence from Putin's Post-Crimea Annexation

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Elected leaders tend to enjoy an increase in popular support when the countries they govern become embroiled in international conflict. For example, George W. Bush could boast a 90% approval rating in the wake of 9/11. Existing theories claim that such “rally effects” occur due to favorable media coverage, support from opposition party members, and/or an uptick in patriotism. These existing theories share a basic assumption: rallies or rally effects reflect sincere changes in preferences, or individuals’ beliefs. In his new *American Political Science Review* article (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs%5b%E2%80%A6%5d-polarity-surge-after-crimea/B587ECFA7B1280DE42D-914DC101296F4>), Henry E. Hale argues for a re-examination of the causal mechanisms in relation to rallying effects.

Hale’s argument lies in the interaction between social desirability considerations, preference falsification, and an ensuing reputational cascade. He builds upon theories that argue individuals change or falsify their preferences because they desire to appear socially acceptable when compared to other members of the same society. In the wake of an international conflict, early and prominent messages of support for elected leaders create an impression that supporting a leader is “the most prevalent and hence socially desirable attitude to hold.” These messages, especially when circulated throughout social media and on television, convince individuals who are sensitive to social pressures to adopt the same positive attitude toward the elected leader to appear socially acceptable, even if these individuals do not sincerely hold such political beliefs. Individuals may adopt public preferences (which diverge from their private ones) to protect themselves from risks such as repression, a threat which can be particularly high within non-democratic systems.



Social desirability considerations and subsequent preference falsification can result in a reputational cascade. Similar to a row of falling dominoes, a reputational cascade makes more and more individuals adopt the same socially desirable attitudes until a social consensus is reached. Hale describes this

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entire process of social desirability, preference falsification, and an ensuing reputational cascade as a “regime defection cascade in reverse.” Reputational cascades have been associated with regime defection (for example, in the Arab Spring). In the event of an international conflict or shocking political event, individuals look to the media to get new information. If the media portrays messages of popular support for elected leaders, a “regime defection cascade in reverse” gets support, rather than defection, for the government.

Hale investigates two hypotheses related to his theory of dissembling and a reputational cascade. He differentiates between two types of supporters: ralliers and dissemblers. Ralliers are individuals who went from a position of non-support to support for Putin. Ralliers’ position of support changed immediately following the rally event. Dissemblers represent individuals who were non-supporters but eventually came to mask or deny their position of non-support and claim support. Hale’s research uses a case study of increased popular support for Vladimir Putin after the 2014 Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula that juts into the Black Sea. After this international conflict, Putin enjoyed an increase of support from 60% to 80% of the Russian population. A nationally representative panel survey of approximately 1,650 individuals was administered in two rounds. An experiment designed to shield interviewees from embarrassment and allow them to answer freely helped him determine that as many as 75% of Putin’s “Crimea ralliers” engaged purposely in a type of dissembling: misrepresenting their past voting behavior. Another experiment indicates these people are insincere not only about their past, but also their present attitudes. In other words, a large share of “Crimea ralliers” were likely insincere in their support for Putin.

Importantly, Hale does not claim that all rallying is insincere. Rather, he argues that rallying may involve a “substantial reputational cascade component” and does not always reflect sincere beliefs in non-democratic (and possibly democratic) settings. Hale’s



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research makes several important contributions to existing literature on rallying effects. First, he draws readers' attention to potential differences in rallying effects across regime types. Second, Hale usefully distinguishes between sincere and insincere preference change, challenging a long-standing assumption of sincerity within the literature on rallying effects. Finally, Hale's research forces readers to reflect upon an uncomfortable question: If individuals mask their private preferences and

adopt what they perceive to be a more socially acceptable preference, what implications might this process have for various forms of political behavior? In this article, Hale not only teaches us something new; he leaves us with exciting questions for future research. ■

Hale, Henry E. 2021. "[Authoritarian Rallying as Reputational Cascade? Evidence from Putin's Popularity Surge after Crimea.](#)" *American Political Science Review*, 1–16.

## Why Bother Using Bots?

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As the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to unfold, social media platforms are clamping down on Russian state-owned media, a key lever the Kremlin uses to spread propaganda and disinformation. The survival of non-democratic regimes in part depends on their ability to manage the information environment in this way. Social media has become a key ingredient in autocrats' toolkits of how to respond to online opposition, which includes the use of trolls and automated bot accounts. But what are bots? What work do they do? And how might this social media tool be used in authoritarian regimes to help such regimes? In their new article, authors Stukal, Sanovich, Bonneau, and Tucker explore these pressing questions through an investigation of the use of pro-government Twitter bots within Russia during times of both offline and online political protests.

While current research explores the use of human trolls by authoritarian regimes, much less work exists that examines bots, or algorithmically controlled social media accounts. Stukal et al. argue that bots offer a number of benefits over other "digital information manipulation tools." Bots are inexpensive, difficult to trace, can be deployed in large numbers, do not require human intervention, and can run online for indefinite periods of time. The authors focus specifically on Twitter bots, algorithmically controlled accounts that can automatically perform many actions like that of a normal (human) user, including posting, retweeting, responding, and liking posts, all without the intervention of a human.

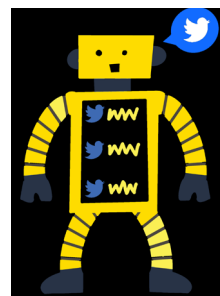
Authoritarian regimes can use Twitter bots for a variety of reasons: bots may be used to show support for controversial governmental programs or candidates hoping for reelection; regional governors are encouraged by the Kremlin to use social media, but public employees "often lack the necessary skills for effective social media communication and rely on bots to artificially inflate relevant activity indicators"; and non-government actors, such as businessmen, may also use bots to signal support for politicians in hopes of getting perks or pay offs. In their article, Stukal et al. remain agnostic about the reasons people may use Twitter bots and assume only that both government agencies and non-governmental actors alike use Twitter bots to maximize the benefits they offer.

The authors theorize that in a competitive authoritarian en-

vironment, Twitter bots could be used in an attempt to alter the cost-benefit analysis of participating in opposition movements, either online or offline. The authors use two theoretical frameworks. First, they theorize that Twitter bots could be used "to reduce participation in offline protests." Second, they theorize that Twitter bots could be used to "control the online agenda... and will be mobilized in response to opposition online activity." Twitter bots may use the same tactics to achieve these different goals. From these theoretical frameworks, the authors derive four strategies Twitter bots might use.

The first strategy available to Twitter bots includes de-emphasizing a protest-related agenda by increasing the frequency with which they post content ("volume amplification"). Similarly, the second strategy is to distract social media users by increasing their retweeting of diverse accounts ("retweet diversity"). The third strategy involves decreasing the opposition supporters' expected benefits by tweeting pro-government posts about Vladimir Putin. The logic behind this "cheerleading" is to make Putin appear more popular, which may make potential protesters think the likelihood of their protest succeeding is lower. A fourth and final strategy available to Twitter bots involves "increasing the expected costs of supporting opposition" through trolling and harassment. This strategy includes "negative campaigning," measured by the number of tweets pro-government Twitter bots' produce that mention Alexey Navalny, a charismatic and prominent Russian opposition leader.

The authors use machine learning to detect bots on Russian political Twitter and find 1,516 pro-government Twitter bots with over one million tweets. The authors then identify both offline protests and online opposition activity. Offline protests were identified in a three-step process including use of the Integrated Early Crisis Warning System, a project that "automatically extracts information from news articles" to generate a list of offline protests, a manual search for mentions of protests in both English and Russian-language mass media, cross-checking their data against three other protest datasets. Stukal et al. identify online



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