Backlash

Fransisco Cantú Memorial EITM Workshop
March 2025

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Jessica S. Sun
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MOTIVATION
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THEORETICAL MODEL
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EMPIRICAL IMPLICATIONS
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Backlash to Repression

Although a primary purpose of repression is to quell dissent, it can instead spur **expanded participation or intensified efforts in mobilized dissent.**

This is often called backlash.

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A Backlash Review

- 91 backlash articles

- 20 years of backlash to repression in the APSR, AJPS, JOP

- Many other frequently referenced articles in subfield journals

Mechanism Category	Deters or Causes Backlash?	Backlash = dissent action or public opinion?	Citation	General or subfield journal	Players	Method
Signaling / ... ▾	Deterr ance ▾	Dissent action ▾	Pan, J., & Siegel, A. A. (2020). How Saudi Crackdowns Fail to Silence Online Dissent. American Political Science Review, 114(1), 109–125. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000650	General ▾	govt, activist, bystander	observational data
Emotion ▾	Deterr ance ▾	Dissent action ▾	Shadmehr, Mehdi. "Investment in the Shadow of Conflict: Globalization, Capital Control, and State Repression." American Political Science Review 113. 4 (2019): 997-1011	General ▾	govt, activist, org	formal theory
Signaling / I... ▾	Deterr ance ▾	Public opinion ▾	Scharpf, Adam, Christian Gläßel, and Pearce Edwards. "International Sports Events and Repression in Autocracies: Evidence from the 1978 FIFA World Cup." American Political Science Review 117.3 (2023): 909-926.	General ▾	govt, activist, media	observational data
Emotion ▾	Deterr ance ▾	Public opinion ▾	Lupu, Yonatan, and Geoffrey P.R. Wallace. "Violence, Nonviolence, and the Effects of International Human Rights Law." American Journal of Political Science 63.2 (2019): 411-426.	General ▾	govt, activist, bystander	survey/ experiment
Strategic Fe... ▾	Deterr ance ▾	Dissent action ▾	Frantz, Erica, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Joseph Wright, and Xu Xu. "Personalization of Power and Repression in Dictatorships." The Journal of Politics 82.1 (2020): 372-377.	General ▾	govt, activists, org	observational data

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A Backlash Review

Conceptualization
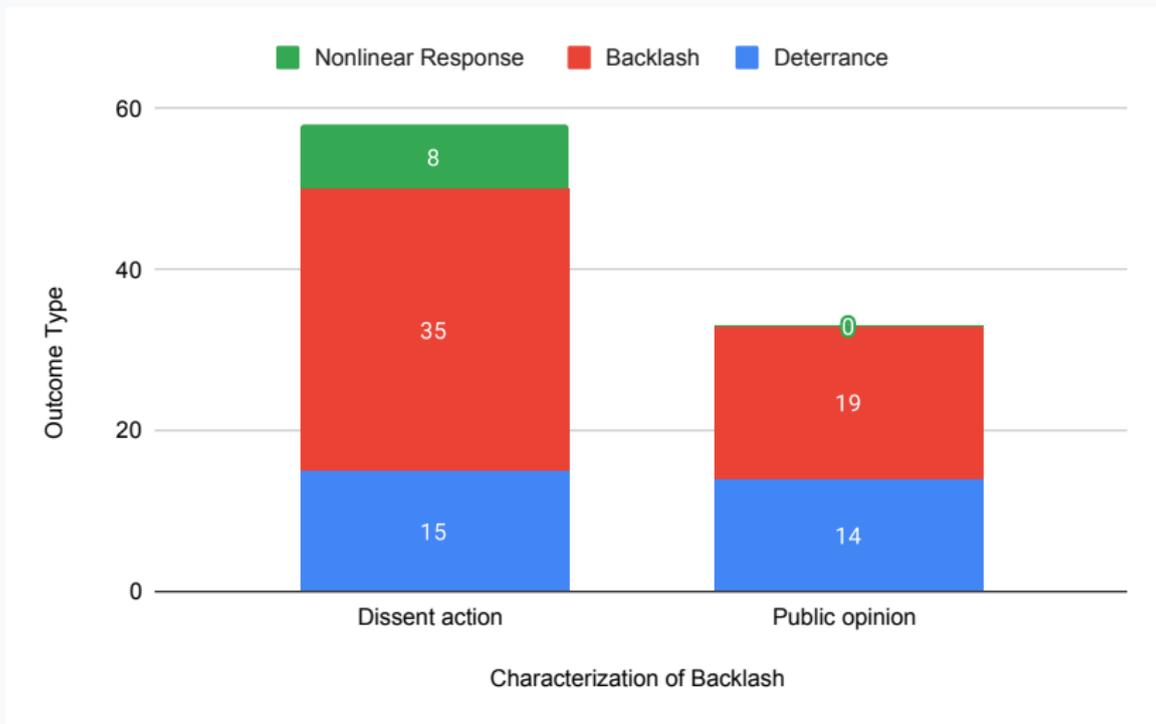
Figure: Concept Implying Backlash/Deterrence

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A Backlash Review

Actors
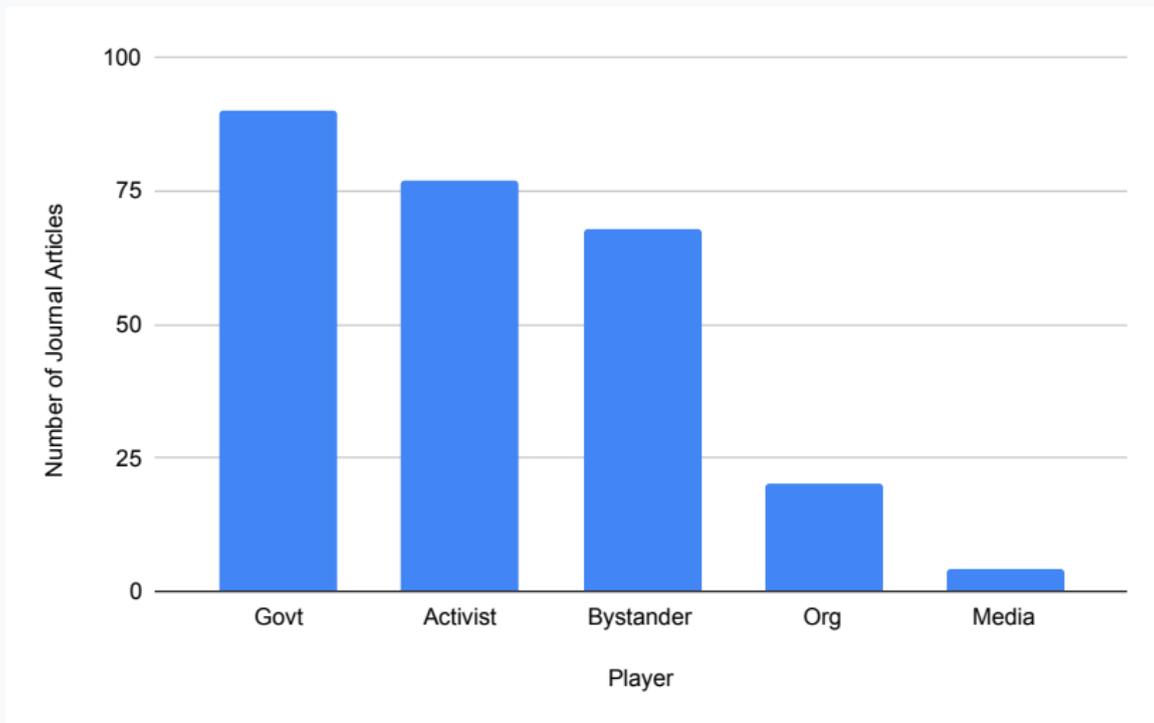
Figure: Political Actors in the Backlash Process

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A Backlash Review

Mechanisms
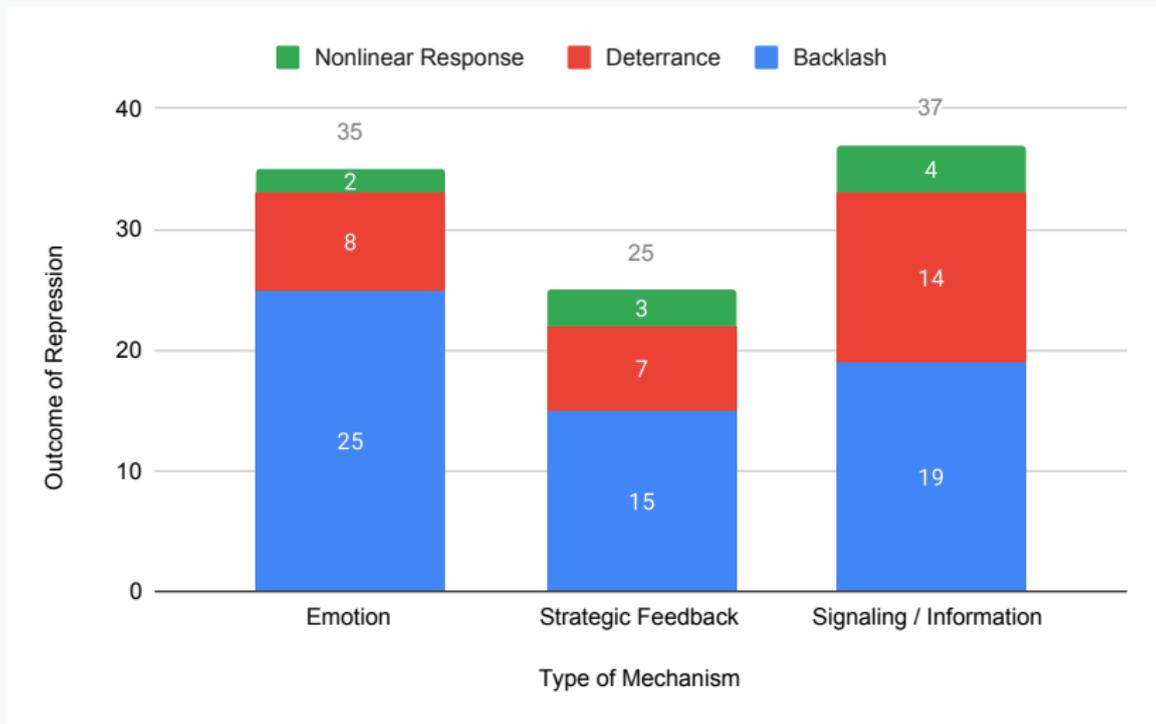
Figure: Mechanisms for Repression to Cause/Deter Backlash

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A Backlash Review   Methodologies
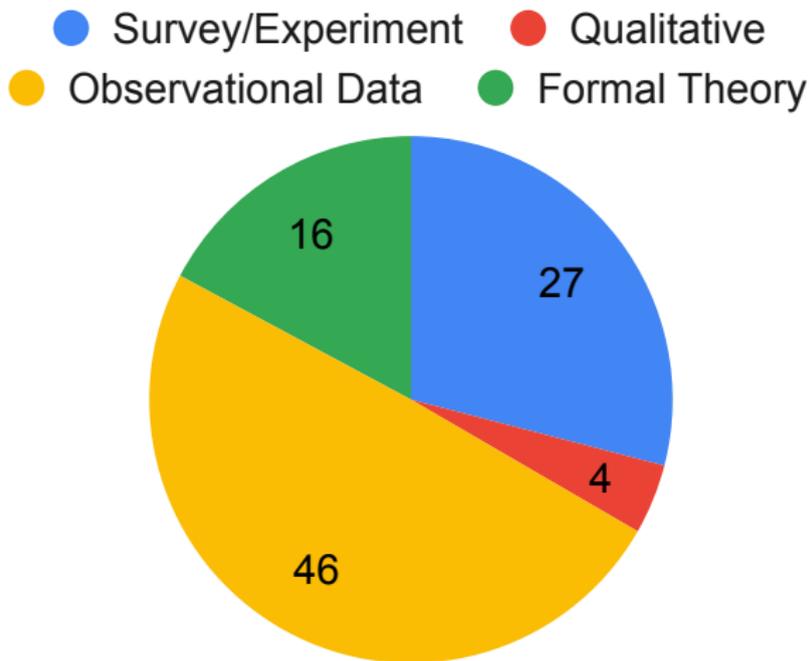
Figure: Methods for studying backlash/deterrence

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Identification Problems

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Identification Problems

- **Observability:**
  How do we know
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Identification Problems

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┌─────────────────────┐
│      Treatment      │
│ (Initial Repression)│
└─────────────────────┘
           │
           ▼
┌─────────────────────┐
│      Mechanism      │
│      (1 of 4)       │
└─────────────────────┘
           │
           ▼
┌─────────────────────┐
│      Outcome        │
│ (Backlash/Deterrence)│
└─────────────────────┘
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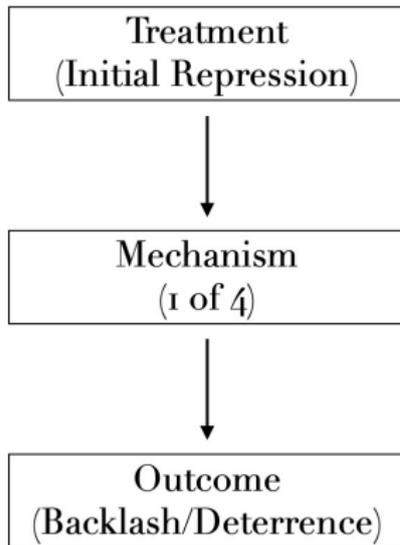
Identification Problems

- **Observability:**
  How do we know
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- **Attribution:**
  What mechanism
  caused (deterred)
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- Common definitions

- Reliable general theory of process

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Identification Problems

- **Observability:**
  How do we know
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  we see dissent after
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- Common definitions
- Reliable general theory of process

- **Attribution:**
  What mechanism
  caused (deterred)
  the backlash?

- Defined mechanisms
- Controlled research designs

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Theory

Objective & Sequence

A formal model to demonstrate and solve the observability and attribution challenges.

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0. Nature sets govt capacity to repress and initial repression,

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1. A bystander demonstrates or abstains from dissent, and

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Theory

Objective & Sequence

A formal model to demonstrate and solve the observability and attribution challenges.

0. Nature sets govt capacity to repress and initial repression,

1. A bystander demonstrates or abstains from dissent, and

2. The government and activist choose contentious strategies.

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Theory

Utility Functions & Definition

$$u_G(e, r, d; \theta, \rho) \tag{1}$$

$$u_A(e, r, d; \theta, \rho) \tag{2}$$

$$d \cdot \left(u_B(e, r; \theta, \rho) - c_B \right) \tag{3}$$

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There exists an equilibrium, characterized by the triple
$(c_B^*(\rho), e^*(d, \theta; \rho), r^*(d, \theta; \rho))$, where Activist effort is

$$e^*(d, \theta; \rho) \in \underset{e \in [0, \bar{e}]}{} u_A(e, r, d; \rho, \theta);$$

Government repression is

$$r^*(d, \theta; \rho) \in \underset{r \in [0, \bar{r}]}{} u_G(e, r, d; \rho, \theta);$$

and where Bystander participates *iff* $c_B \leqslant c_B^*(\rho)$, where

$$c_B^*(\rho) = \int u_B(e^*(1, \theta; \rho), r^*(1, \theta; \rho), \rho; \theta)\pi_p(\theta \mid \rho) \, d\theta.$$

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$$c_B^*(\rho) = \int u_B(e^*(1, \theta; \rho), r^*(1, \theta; \rho), \rho; \theta)\pi_p(\theta \mid \rho) \, d\theta.$$

Backlash: Increase in the bystander's incentive to demonstrate, $c_B^*(\rho)$, caused by an increase in initial repression, ρ.

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Observability: A Problem of Theory

1. Define backlash
2. Identify counterfactual for treatment effects
3. General assumptions for reliability

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Attribution: A Problem of Research Design

1. Derive expectations specific to each mechanism

2. Identify what to hold fixed to isolate the treatment and expected outcome

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Attribution

Process of Analysis

To examine what must be true for each mechanism to produce observable backlash, we

1. Hold r and e fixed in the conflict and assert complete information to derive the direct effect of initial repression (rho) on bystander demonstration (d) through **emotion**

2. Hold r (e) and u_B fixed to derive the direct effect of initial repression (ρ) on effort e (r) and thus the indirect effect on bystander demonstration (d) through **strategic feedback**

3. Hold u_B fixed in (ρ, e, r) to derive the direct effect of repression (ρ) on bystander demonstration through **learning**

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Attribution

Emotion

Direct Effect: Emotion

Backlash that arises from an emotional response requires that repression increases **negative emotion** (direct effect) and that participation offsets the direct negative effects (**agency**).

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Attribution

Strategic Feedback with the Activist

Direct Effect: Initial repression on effort

Activist effort increases (decreases) as initial repression increases.

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Attribution

Strategic Feedback with the Activist

Direct Effect: Initial repression on effort

Activist effort increases (decreases) as initial repression increases.

Indirect Effect: Effort on participation

Bystander participation (backlash) is increasing (decreasing) **in activist effort.**

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Attribution   Strategic Feedback with the Government

Direct Effect: Initial repression on repressive response

Government repression increases (decreases) as initial repression increases.

Indirect Effect: Expected repression on participation

Bystander participation is increasing (decreasing) **in expected repression.**

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Attribution

For both the anger and logistical mechanisms, the things that increase participation also increase activist effort and vice versa.

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Attribution

Nota Bene

For both the anger and logistical mechanisms, the things that increase participation also increase activist effort and vice versa.

∴ Observing a larger demonstration after repression is insufficient to distinguish mechanisms.

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Attribution

Learning

Requirement: Repression & type

The bystander's posterior belief about the government's type is correlated with initial repression.

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Attribution

Learning

Requirement: Repression & type

The bystander's posterior belief about the government's type is correlated with initial repression.

Learning: Repression & participation

Backlash that emerges from an informational mechanism requires that u_B increases in government capacity **as understood from initial repression.**

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Attribution

Research Design
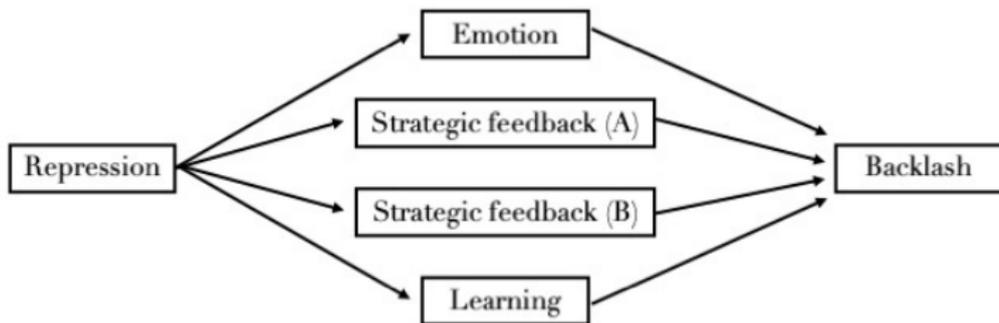
Figure: A problem of attribution

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Substantive Takeaways

- Scholarly research on backlash is varied and informative but difficult to understand as a corpus of knowledge. This is due to two causal identification problems.

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Substantive Takeaways

- Scholarly research on backlash is varied and informative but difficult to understand as a corpus of knowledge. This is due to two causal identification problems.

- **Observability:** For the concept of backlash to be determined as present from observable indicators, theories need to adhere to a common definition and include key assumptions depending on the mechanism at work.

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Substantive Takeaways

- Scholarly research on backlash is varied and informative but difficult to understand as a corpus of knowledge. This is due to two causal identification problems.

- **Observability:** For the concept of backlash to be determined as present from observable indicators, theories need to adhere to a common definition and include key assumptions depending on the mechanism at work.

- **Attribution:** A research design should sufficiently control for different mechanism characteristics to be sure as to what causal process the treatment activates.

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Broader Contributions

- Coded summary of scholarly understanding of when and how repression causes either backlash or deterrence.

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Broader Contributions

- Coded summary of scholarly understanding of when and how repression causes either backlash or deterrence.

- General formal model of backlash with four possible causal mechanisms from first repression to second political contest

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Broader Contributions

- Coded summary of scholarly understanding of when and how repression causes either backlash or deterrence.

- General formal model of backlash with four possible causal mechanisms from first repression to second political contest

- Clear guidance for improved and precise theories of reactive dissent to empirically identify it as backlash in the wild.

- Suggestions for research designs to more effectively attribute backlash or deterrence to specific mechanisms.

Send us your thoughts!

emily.h.ritter@vanderbilt.edu

Equilibrium

There exists an equilibrium, characterized by the triple
$(c_B^*(\rho_o), e^*(d, \theta; \rho_o), r^*(d, \theta; \rho_o))$, where activist effort is

$$e^*(d, \theta; \rho_o) \in \underset{e \in [0, \bar{e}]}{} u_A(e, r, d; \rho_o, \theta);$$

government repression is

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