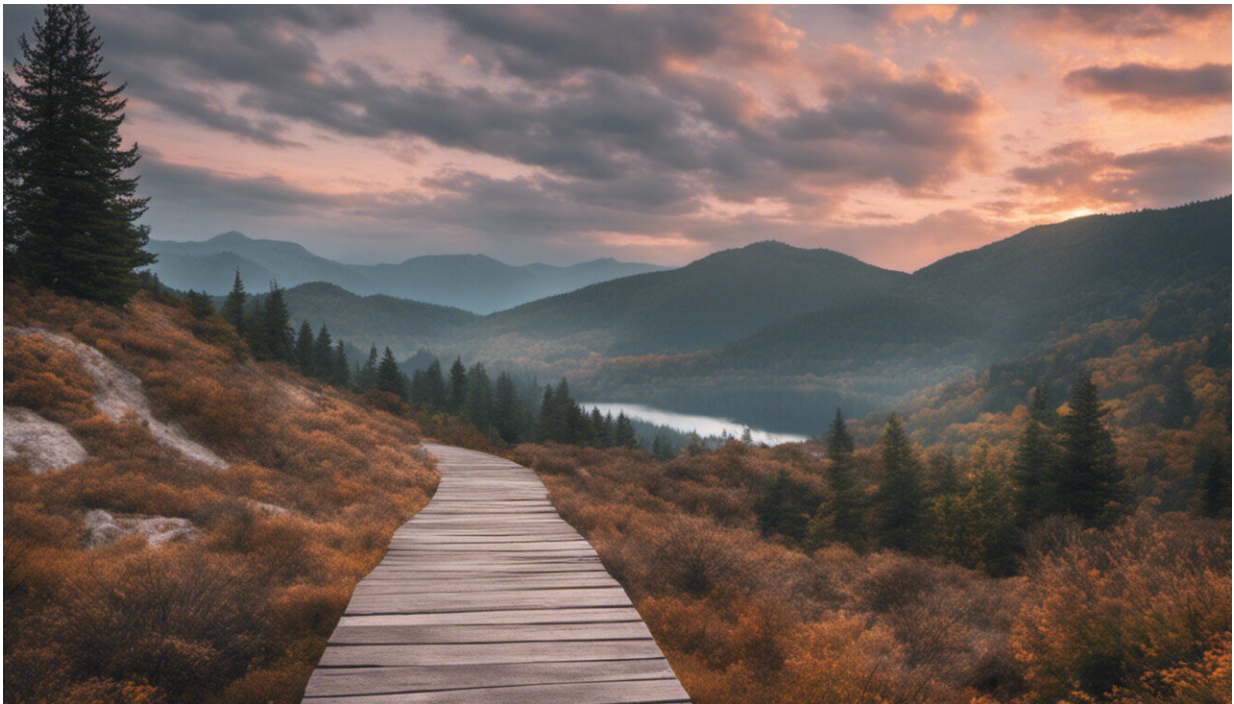


# New research shows even authoritarian regimes struggle to pass laws

October 2 2018, by Ben Noble

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When we think of parliaments in non-democratic states, we often think of a room full of raised hands. This compelling image of unanimity conveys a simple idea: that these assemblies are stuffed with loyal servants of the ruling elite. Rather than scrutinise, challenge, amend, and block initiatives from the government, they provide guaranteed support.

Rather than act as a check on executive power, they provide symbolic, merely ceremonial approval. Or that's how the conventional wisdom goes.

There is evidence, however, that jars against this "rubber stamp" image. In a [new research paper](#), I present data collected by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD](#)) on the passage of budget bills through legislatures in 33 "non-democracies" – states without free and fair elections, limited political liberties, and few checks on executive power. If these bodies are merely "rubber stamps", which pass laws without complaint or delay, then budget figures should remain unchanged during their legislative passage. But the data don't show that. In fact, around three quarters of those non-democratic states that supplied data to the OECD reported changes (both increases and decreases) in spending figures as bills passed through their respective parliaments.

So what explains these odd observations? In order to answer this question, I focused on one prominent, contemporary non-democratic state: Russia.

The first step in the analysis involved seeing whether bills were amended during parliamentary passage in this particular country case. I collected information on all bills submitted by the political executive (both the government and the president) and signed into law over a six-year period (2008-2013). When filtering out various types of bills for the sake of comparability, I was left with 837 bill-law cases.

All bills must clear a number of "readings" in the [State Duma](#) – the lower house of the Russian national legislature, the Federal Assembly – in order to become laws. These "readings" are opportunities for legislators to debate, and possibly amend (or even reject) legislative initiatives.

I collected texts of bills as originally submitted to the legislature, as well as the texts of the respective laws. I then measured the extent to which the text content of these bills had changed during their passage through the State Duma.

## **Change happens**

The findings are clear. Contrary to [conventional wisdom](#), but in line with the OECD data, bill amendment is the norm, not the exception. What's more, bills sometimes changed dramatically during legislative passage.

Take, for example, bill [293332-6](#). When introduced into the State Duma in June 2013, the bill was two pages long, and concerned a basic change to the state registration of aircraft. When the bill was adopted by the Duma in October 2013, however, it had mushroomed into a 65-page document touching on various complex details of tax legislation.

So what – or, rather, who – is responsible for these amendments?

In order to answer this question, I took a two-pronged approach. I carried out a statistical analysis of the extent of bill change, looking at which variables proved significant in accounting for the degree of text amendment. I also carried out case studies of policy-making episodes, exploring the actors and issues involved during particular periods of bill amendment in the Duma.

Both tracks of analysis resulted in the same insight. Bill amendments did not result from legislators responding to executive initiatives and proposing their own changes. Rather, changes to bill texts resulted from policy disagreements between members of the political executive.

At first sight, this might seem somewhat odd. Even if members of the executive – such as ministers – disagree over policy details in

discussions, the decision to introduce a bill into parliament should signal the ending of these conflicts. But my paper's findings show how ministers and other members of the executive sometimes continue their policy disputes after cabinet has signed off on introducing a particular bill into the legislature.

This can happen for a number of reasons. If, for example, politicians are in a rush to make a legal change, executive actors can agree to introduce a bill into parliament, even though policy negotiations between ministers have not been finalised.

## **Good for democracy?**

In a more interesting scenario, executive actors can learn about initiatives crafted by other members of the regime leadership, and with which they disagree, at the point of parliamentary introduction, having been excluded from cabinet-level discussion. They can then use the legislative stage of lawmaking to challenge and amend these proposal. All the while, legislators themselves can remain impotent loyalists, ready to ratify any settlements following intra-[executive](#) negotiations.

What are the broad takeaways from this research? Authoritarian regimes sometimes struggle to pass legislation, much like governments in many democracies. But this isn't necessarily a sign of emergent democracy. Rather, this difficulty can reflect policy disagreements between members of the ruling political elite, rather than opposition from legislators.

That means that if a [bill](#) fails to become law or is amended significantly it's not necessarily cause for excitement. These observations might simply reflect policy squabbling between ministers. In any event, passing laws isn't always easy ... even if the rest of the world thinks you have absolute control.

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