

Suggestion and Suppression: Regulating Public Perception and Public Knowledge of Data in Autocracies

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Abstract: Many autocracies are implementing open data initiatives to support growth. However, conventional political science literature notes that the liberalization of information and data transparency can destabilize authoritarian regimes. What strategies, then, do authoritarian regimes employ to regulate sensitive information when increased data transparency is necessary? I argue that authoritarian regimes differentiate between sensitive political issues that are useful, and those that are threatening. Issues are useful to the regime when their narratives can be manipulated to highlight the regime's competence and legitimacy. Issues are threatening to the regime when their data exposes governmental mismanagement and the revealed information cannot be easily reframed into narratives with positive valence. Autocracies employ a strategy of *suggestion* to shape public interpretation of useful issues, and utilize *suppression* to prevent public discussion of threatening issues. I test my theories using the case of Malaysia, an upper-middle income electoral autocracy that has embraced open data initiatives to foster economic transformation. Leveraging a novel dataset of 47000 Parliamentary Questions, I show that relative to other topics, Malaysia's autocracy provides more data on useful topics and less data on threatening topics. I also show that the regime continues to employ these information control strategies even after Malaysia's democratization in 2018. I supplement my quantitative analysis with interview data. These findings contribute to our understanding of authoritarian information control, and demonstrate the limits of democratization on substantive freedoms.

1 Introduction

Many autocracies are implementing open data initiatives to sustain economic growth as they transition to a post-industrial economy. Malaysia's ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN) government, for example, set up an open data portal in 2014 that published hundreds of government datasets that were previously confidential. Given that data sharing and circulation is necessary for fostering innovation in a post-industrial economy, autocracies face a dilemma. On the one hand, enabling the free flow of data and information promotes economic transformation. On the other, conventional political science literature notes that increased information flow and data transparency can destabilize autocracies (Kuran, 1991; Greitens, 2016). Faced with this tension, what strategies do authoritarian regimes employ to regulate information under conditions of increased data openness?

I argue that in post-industrial autocracies, regimes regulate only sensitive political issues, to maximize information and openness about non-sensitive issues, and to balance economic needs with political stability. Furthermore, they differentiate sensitive political issues into those that are useful, and those that are threatening. Issues are useful to the regime when their narratives can be manipulated to highlight the regime's competence, morality, and legitimacy. Issues are threatening to the regime when their data expose governmental mismanagement and the revealed information cannot be easily reframed into narratives with positive valence. I show that autocracies use a strategy of *suggestion* to shape public interpretation of useful issues, and a strategy of *suppression* to prevent public discussion of threatening issues. Autocracies utilize suggestion by releasing data and statistics on useful issues strategically. These statistics are aggregated, combined, and/or contextualized in ways that set the terms of discussion and

interpretation for useful issues. In contrast, regimes suppress and withhold data and statistics on threatening issues.

I apply this theory to the case of Malaysia between 2008 and 2018, an electoral authoritarian regime that had embraced open data initiatives to foster economic transformation. I analyze an original dataset of over 47000 Parliamentary Questions (PQ) responses from Malaysia's *Dewan Rakyat* (lower house of parliament) to show that Malaysia's electoral autocracy uses suggestion to regulate information on Race and Ethnicity – a useful issue – and suppresses data on Corruption – a threatening issue. Furthermore, I leverage Malaysia's democratic transition in 2018 to show that freedom of information did not improve after electoral turnover; Malaysia's newly liberalized regime continued using the strategies of suggestion and suppression. I complement my quantitative analysis with interview evidence on the politics of information and data transparency.

My research contributes to literatures on authoritarianism, regime transitions, and the political economy of economic change. Scholars of authoritarianism have noted that autocrats regulate information through propaganda and censorship (Rosenfeld and Wallace, 2024; Guriev and Treisman, 2020; Roberts, 2018). I build on this research to conceptualize different information subtypes and identify novel mechanisms of information control specifically pertaining to data transparency. Second, I contribute to research on democratization's impact on substantive freedoms (Dahl, 1971; Loxton, 2021; Laebens and Lührmann, 2023), showing empirically that freedom of information does not improve following political liberalization. Finally, the comparative political economy literature has examined how autocrats manage economic liberalization when developing the industrial economy (Gallagher, 2002). However, the post-industrial economy may require new forms of socio-political liberalization along with

economic liberalization. My research interrogates how electoral autocracies balance economic growth with political stability to successfully foster post-industrial growth.

In the following sections, I will first discuss the politics of data transparency in authoritarian regimes, and then introduce my theoretical framework of suggestion and suppression as tools for regulating information. Next, I provide context on Malaysia and present qualitative evidence of its regime's management of public perception and public knowledge of information. Subsequently, I analyze quantitative evidence of suggestion and suppression in Malaysia's parliament. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings for understanding information control in autocracies and suggest areas for future research.

2 Economic Transformation, Open Data, and Electoral Authoritarianism

The Politics of Electoral Autocracy

Many electoral autocracies, whose legitimacy hinges on economic performance, have faced stagnating growth and are adopting policies for economic transformation in recent years. Unlike growth that relies on continual increases in labor and capital, these policies aim to generate sustainable growth by improving productivity, especially through knowledge generation and data circulation (Powell and Snellman, 2004). Open data, defined as data that are “freely used, re-used and redistributed by anyone – subject only ... to the requirement to attribute and share alike” (Open Data Handbook, 2014), supports this policy by creating research opportunities, prevents the reduplication of data, fostering collaboration, and facilitating knowledge transfer to industry (Kitchin, 2014; Lee et al., 2016). These benefits increase economic efficiency and productivity, ultimately driving sustainable growth. A subset of open data is open government data. Besides providing the same benefits as non-governmental data, open government data also supports policy-making and public service delivery, such as

infrastructure and property management (ACSH 2022). As a non-exhaustible and sustainable resource, data's economic value grows with increased sharing, exchange, and analysis by stakeholders (Monino, 2016). Thus, the economic potential of data is maximized only when data are made open, transparent, and accessible.

Post-industrial growth demands new approaches to open data and information transparency, which poses a dilemma for autocracies. While the free flow of data fosters economic transformation by enabling data-driven value creation in public and private sectors, it also risks destabilizing autocracies by facilitating elite coups and mass uprisings (Greitens, 2016). Information flow can reveal regime vulnerabilities, encourage loyalty shifts (Kuran, 1991), facilitate collective action (King et al., 2013; King et al., 2017), disseminate repertoires of contention (Beissinger, 2007), and expose government incompetency and corruption (Wallace, 2023).

To manage the risk of destabilization, authoritarian regimes use propaganda and censorship to control information. They disseminate positive narratives and remove, block, or ban unfavorable ones (Rosenfeld and Wallace, 2024). They use propaganda to bolster perceived regime competence and morality (Guriev and Treisman, 2019; 2022; Wedeen, 2019), and recast repressive actions as protective (Lankina and Watanabe, 2017). When data expose regime flaws, regimes employ ideology to portray strength and stability (Wallace, 2023). This shift from overt repression to covert informational control reflects autocrats' increasing preference for nonviolent, preemptive measures of control (Davenport, 2007; Hassan et al. 2019; Stanig, 2015; Rozenas and Stukal, 2019; Guriev and Treisman, 2019; Rosenfeld and Wallace, 2024). Similarly, autocracies have long censored information to "stifle independent criticism and analysis" (Geddes and Zaller, 1989). Censorship limits public access to sensitive information by raising the costs of

accessing it, including through psychological fear and time investment (Roberts 2020; 2018). While autocrats routinely censor traditional media outlets and content (Roberts, 2020; Larreguy and Marshall, 2019; Lorentzen, 2014), they have also increasingly employed online censorship to prevent collective action (King et al., 2013; 2017) and influence individual behavior (Roberts, 2018) as the internet emerged as a platform for dissent (Tufekci, 2017).

My research explores information control in post-industrial electoral authoritarian regimes, where the trade-offs between stability and development must be managed alongside the prevention of coups and uprisings. I examine how these post-industrial high-income autocracies regulate data openness and identify two strategies of information control used by autocrats to manage this economic resource. Scholarship in the authoritarian control literature tends to focus on either propaganda or censorship, and argues that autocracies are shifting from the latter to the former. Conversely, I disaggregate information into subtypes and argue that even sophisticated autocrats continue to employ both strategies, adapting their strategies to the subtype of information at hand.

The Politics of Democratic Transitions

Scholarship on regime transitions offers two views on what happens after democratization. Some argue that new democracies inherit authoritarian legacies, such as authoritarian successor parties, constitutions, and subnational authoritarian enclaves (Loxton, 2015; 2021; Grzymala-Busse, 2002; Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Albertus and Menaldo, 2018). Others believe that democratic institutions introduce horizontal and vertical accountability to constrain the behavior of elites and foster liberal norms, including freedom of information (North, 1990; Przeworski, 1999; Fearon, 2011; Laebens and Lührmann, 2023; Lührmann et al., 2020; O'Donnell, 1998; Diamond and Morlino, 2004). The authoritarian inheritance literature

suggests that data transparency will not improve under Malaysia's new democracy, while scholarship on democratic institutions expect that it will. I leverage Malaysia's regime transition to test these hypotheses.

Suggestion and Suppression under Autocracies and Democracies

Autocracies balance economic needs against political stability by allowing non-sensitive data to circulate while tightly regulating sensitive ones. I argue that sensitive issues can be differentiated into politically useful issues and politically threatening issues. Autocracies control public perception of useful issues and limit public knowledge of threatening ones. Issues are useful to the regime when their narratives can be manipulated to highlight the regime's competence, morality, and legitimacy. These issues can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on how it is framed and contextualized, allowing regimes to shape discourses on these issues in ways that bolster their legitimacy. By strategically releasing, disaggregating, combining, and/or contextualizing data, regimes set the terms of discussion and determine the authoritative interpretation of the issue. They can claim credit for successes, and create an image of morality and effective leadership through this strategy. For example, to suggest that income inequality is improving, an authoritarian regime might release aggregated statistics that show an increase in average income per capita, instead of disaggregated data, which could reveal that wealth is concentrated in the top quartile. Similarly, a regime might contend that they have successfully fostered gender equality by choosing to highlight a decreasing wage gap between higher-educated women and men, although other statistics might show that the average wage gap across all education levels is rising. That is, income distribution and gender equality are examples of useful issues that the regime can reframe to underscore their competence and success through strategically wielding relevant data. I contend that electoral autocracies will

release more information on useful topics to shape public interpretation of such issues. I label this strategy *suggestion*. This expectation gives me the following observable implication:

H1: Electoral autocracies will release more data on sensitive but useful political issues than they will for all other types of issues.

Issues are threatening to the regime when their data expose governmental mismanagement and moreover, are not amenable to being reframed in a positive manner, regardless of how the numbers are disaggregated, combined, or contextualized. Information on threatening issues will reveal facts or discrepancies between reported and actual information that are difficult, if not impossible, for the regime to explain away. Regimes therefore prefer to withhold information on threatening issues altogether. I label this strategy *suppression*. Examples of threatening issues include failed government projects and problems in the built and physical environment. For example, if a government project grossly exceeds its allocated budget, any data provided will reveal a discrepancy between the stated project budget and the actual cost – it is difficult for the regime to explain such a discrepancy. Similarly, when problems such as flooding or air pollution regularly occur, any information revealed will only highlight that the government has failed to provide the necessary infrastructure to provide efficient drainage and clean air. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Electoral autocracies will release less data on sensitive but threatening political issues than they will for all other types of issues.

Furthermore, surveying the regime transitions literature, I expect that new democracies emerging from electoral autocracies will inherit similar politics and behavior. In their early years, these regimes face multiple challenges such as containing opposition and the old regime, stabilizing the economy, reforming institutions, and maintaining public support for

democratization (Schedler, 1998; Diamond, 1997; Diamond, 1999; Haggard and Kaufman, 1994). Consequently, they remain sensitive to the destabilizing risks posed by information flow. Moreover, new democracies that emerge from electoral autocracies may retain and reform existing electoral institutions rather than build new ones, given the presence of existing, albeit flawed, electoral institutions. As such, they inherit the institutions through which autocracies regulate information and the social cleavages that shape these regulations. I therefore expect that new democracies will also utilize suggestion and suppression to control information flow in their early years, leading to the following observable implications:

H3: Newly liberalized regimes will release more data on sensitive but useful political issues than they will for all other types of issues.

H4: Newly liberalized regimes will release less data on sensitive but threatening political issues than they will for all other types of issues.

3 The Malaysia Case

Malaysia, a former British colony that gained independence in 1957, is a multiracial country of 32 million people with a population breakdown of 69.4% *Bumiputera* (Malays and Indigenous Groups), 23.2% Chinese, 6.7% Indians, and others (DOSM, 2024). It consists of 13 provinces and three territories and operates as a federal constitutional monarchy, with the Head of State role rotating among nine state monarchs in peninsular Malaysia. Malaysia's Westminster-style federal elections are held at least once every five years, electing 222 members to the *Dewan Rakyat*, the lower house of parliament (IFES, 2024). For six decades from 1957 to 2018, the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition – previously the Alliance Party – ruled Malaysia, holding a parliamentary supermajority until 2008 and a majority until 2018. Despite regular elections, the playing field is severely tilted towards the ruling party (Levitsky and Way, 2010;

Freedom House, 2017). In 2018, BN lost its majority to the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH), sparking Malaysia's transition from electoral authoritarianism to electoral democracy.

Race and Ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity has been an intractable in Malaysia since colonial times, when race determined one's place in British colonial political economy. The salience of race persisted after independence, with Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution enshrining "the special position of the Malays" as sons of the soil (*Bumiputeras*) (Federal Constitution of Malaysia, 1957). This Article gave legal basis for the ruling party's ideology of Malay Supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*), positioning Chinese and Indians as comparatively foreign and secondary groups in Malaysia (Osman and Gomez, 2020).

As Malaysia's first ruling party after independence, BN was founded as a multi-party coalition representing the interests of Malays (the United Malays National Organization; UMNO), Indians (Malaysian Indian Congress), and Chinese (Malaysian Chinese Association). This coalition further entrenched the salience of racial groupings in Malaysian politics. As BN's largest party, UMNO dominated the coalition. It secured top cabinet roles (Case, 2021) and the position of Prime Minister in every election (Lopez, 2015). State resources were used to support UMNO's coffers (Case, 2021) and agenda, including the New Economic Policy (NEP), an affirmative action policy aimed at Malays and Indigenous Groups – UMNO's core constituency. Ideologically, BN also championed UMNO's brand of Malay-Muslim dominance (Chin, 2017; Osman and Gomez, 2020). Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, once famously declared that "this government is based on UMNO" and "Let there be no mistake – the political system is founded on Malay dominance" (Case, 2021).

The BN's position and racial politics were solidified after the 1969 racial riots in Kuala Lumpur, which erupted following electoral gains by opposition parties seen as favoring Chinese interests (Gabriel, 2015). After this episode, BN began advocating more strongly for Malay Supremacy (Chin, 2017), using the riots to highlight Malaysia's ostensibly fragile racial balance and frame their rule as vital for maintaining racial harmony (Gabriel, 2015). This rhetoric continued throughout their rule (Interview K, 2023; Interview R, 2023, Interview T, 2023) and was used to justify BN's rule and policies, perceived as crucial to maintaining racial balance. Eventually, Mahathir Mohamad, a Malay nationalist, was elected as Prime Minister and cemented the ideology of Malay Supremacy during his three-decade tenure (Chin, 2017). Moreover, the introduction of the NEP in 1971 affected all parts of social, economic, and political life of Malaysians and further entrenched the ideology of Malay Supremacy in Malaysian society.¹ Many of the affirmative action policies born out of NEP persist today, emphasizing the continued importance of race in Malaysian society as shaped by the BN.

My interviews indicate that Race and Ethnicity remains a sensitive issue in Malaysia. Interviewee R stated that the Malaysian regime believes that racial harmony is maintained by a delicate equilibrium, and is careful about jeopardizing that equilibrium. R opined that the government is afraid of the public jumping to conclusions if allowed to view certain data on race and ethnicity, and that Malay ultra-nationalists and anti-NEP forces both could use such information maliciously. Similarly, Interviewee E noted that racial data are grouped at a more aggregated level to "sustain the major narrative underlying the politics of Malaysia." In other

¹ For instance, there are race-based quotas for student admissions to universities, *Bumiputera*-quotas for ownership stakes in companies, hiring preferences for *Bumiputera* in the public sector and government-linked companies, and preferences for *Bumiputera*-owned companies in procurement (Rasiah et al., 2015; Gomez et al., 2021; Cheong et al., 2016).

words, Race and Ethnicity remains a sensitive political issue that has the potential to undermine BN's ruling legitimacy.

However, Race and Ethnicity is also politically useful to BN. Data and information on the topic can be framed in ways that reinforce BN's legitimacy and policies. For instance, the *Bumiputera* category in official measures includes both wealthier, urban Malays and poorer, rural non-Malay indigenous groups (Interview E, 2023). Calculations made using this categorization might then conclude that *Bumiputera*/Malay income is lower than it otherwise might if calculations were done using more disaggregated categories. This inherent flexibility in interpretation means that data on Race and Ethnicity can be useful for the regime. BN can use these calculations to argue that Malaysia's racial balance is fragile and that Malays remain economically disadvantaged, reinforcing the need for its preferential policies and justifying its continued rule with selective statistics.

Corruption

Corruption is a persistent issue in Malaysian politics. On a pocketbook basis, business transactions, public services and law enforcement depend on petty corruption. More prominently, high-profile cases have implicated royalty, ministers, and party leaders in bribery, fund misappropriation, patronage, and nepotism (ABAC, 2020; Transparency International Malaysia, 2024; Reuters, 2010). Many corruption cases occur via government procurement processes; between 2013 and 2018, most complaints to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission were related to procurement (Mohamad Azmi and Ismail, 2023). Government procurement often bypasses open tenders and competitive bidding in favor of political connections, which become important for winning large state projects (Azhar, 2022; BTI, 2016). Leakage of public funds also happens post-tender (Azhar, 2022). UMNO leaders also secured many business advantages

for party leaders through political appointments within large companies and tender decisions based on NEP racial-quotas (Mohamad Nawab and Gomez, 2020). The awarding of many such tenders to well-connected and powerful *Bumiputera* companies fueled resentment against corruption as well as racial tensions. Corruption through procurement has led to more expensive public projects, lower quality public goods, and the entrenchment of the political-business nexus (*New Straits Times*, 2020).

Due to its prevalence in everyday life, corruption has long been a major concern for Malaysians and politicians alike (Transparency International, 2020): prime ministers over the years have consistently prioritized anti-corruption efforts. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission was established in 1967 (MACC, 2024) and various administrations have launched numerous anti-corruption initiatives, including reforming electoral systems, strengthening public service delivery, increasing transparency in procurement systems, and the creation of Compliance Units in key enforcement agencies (Muhamad and Gani, 2020). However, Malaysia's corruption problem persists. The issue came to a head when the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal broke in 2015. Established by Najib Razak's administration as a national sovereign wealth fund, 1MDB became a vehicle for corruption, with Najib and his associates siphoning over USD \$4.5 billion (*The Star*, 2018). The astronomical scale and audacity of the corruption triggered an unprecedented backlash from society. Najib allegedly transferred USD \$681 into his personal accounts (Beech, 2018), hoarded USD \$275 million worth of luxury goods in his house, and funneled over USD \$200 million to his stepson to fund the film 'The Wolf of Wall Street' (Davidson, 2019). The 1MDB scandal epitomized decades of corruption among the political and economic elite, where patronage, nepotism, and cronyism played out in an explosive manner.

My interviews indicate that corruption is a politically sensitive issue in Malaysia. Interviewee K highlighted that procurement data is sensitive because it reveals who received government contracts and at what price, potentially exposing cronyism. Interviewee Y agreed, noting that procurement records are hard to access, often involving off-the-books ministerial decisions, as in the 1MDB case. Y further mentioned that toll agreements, concession deals, and data “related to corruption” are particularly sensitive.

The opacity around information in Corruption reflects its status as a threatening political issue for the regime. Any data shared will likely expose legal violations, reveal discrepancies between reported and actual numbers, and/or demonstrate the extent of embezzlement or overspending. Unlike with Race and Ethnicity, the regime cannot easily manipulate or reframe corruption data to obscure discrepancies, nor can it justify clear cases of overspending or cronyism as developmental spending. Corruption is therefore a threatening topic to the regime.

Democratization – Reform and Continuity

In the 2018 general elections following the 1MDB scandal, BN lost its parliamentary majority for the first time. PH, comprising of former opposition parties and led by Mahathir Mohamad, replaced BN as Malaysia’s ruling party. PH promised “transparency and openness” alongside comprehensive institutional and political reforms to address years of corruption and incompetence under BN. PH aimed to tackle corruption on all fronts, including reforming procurement processes, combating patronage and rent-seeking, and becoming one of the top ten cleanest countries by 2030 (Pakatan Harapan, 2018).

However, racial dynamics in Malaysia remain politically sensitive. Despite PH’s commitment to racial equality and opposition to UMNO’s Malay-Muslim hegemony, it nonetheless made overtures to *Bumiputera* privilege and affirmative action. In their manifesto

(2018), PH stated that they aimed to “restore the dignity of the Malays and Malay institutions” and to improve the economic competitiveness of Malays and *Bumiputeras*. That is, while PH made strides toward equality, political priorities still emphasize Malay and *Bumiputera* welfare, highlighting the enduring racial cleavages in Malaysian politics.

Similarly, corruption persists despite some high-profile convictions, such as the imprisonment of former prime minister Najib. In September 2023, for instance, a major corruption case against Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, UMNO and BN leader, was dismissed, sparking protests over the attorney general’s independence (Freedom House, 2024). Broader corruption issues remain, particularly within state-owned enterprises, with stalled transparency reforms and limited independent oversight (Freedom House, 2024).

Data Transparency Initiatives Before and After 2018

The BN government recognized the value of open data for economic development, a priority later reinforced by the PH administration. This focus was reflected in key policy documents such as the 11th and 12th Malaysia Plans and the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint. In 2014, the government began promoting data-sharing within the public sector, highlighting Big Data Analytics as a means to enhance public service. To that end, the government published various circulars on open government data and appointed the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (MAMPU) to lead this effort. MAMPU (which means “able” or “can” in Malay) established infrastructure for intra-government data sharing and a basic open government data website for public consumption (Interview M, 2023).

Under MAMPU’s leadership, private and public sector data sharing expanded, and after 2018, efforts gained momentum. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) launched a more accessible open data portal, and MAMPU formed a working group with media

practitioners, non-governmental organizations, and academics to identify desired data types and policy solutions (Interview M, 2023). The PH government showed interest in a federal Right to Information (RTI) law, with civil society organizations collaborating with MAMPU and the Prime Minister’s Office to explore RTI frameworks through forums and workshops (Interview S, 2023). These open data initiatives aligned with PH’s commitment to accountability and transparency and created a legal, institutional, and technical foundation for greater information transparency in Malaysia.

Despite strides toward data transparency, Malaysia’s data landscape remains constrained by the Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972 and the Statistics Act 1965. The OSA enables any Minister, Chief Minister of a State, and/or delegated public official to classify government documents as “Top Secret,” “Secret,” “Confidential,” or “Restricted” at any time (OSA, 1972). Ministers can classify or declassify information at will, without justification. OSA therefore grants members of government sweeping authority to shape and limit public knowledge of public sector information. The broad and vague coverage of the law also creates a cautious culture among bureaucrats, who may withhold rather than share data to avoid potential legal repercussions. Similarly, the Statistics Act grants DOSM authority to “collect and interpret” data across various policy areas to other agencies, stakeholders, and the public (Shaharudin, 2021; Statistics Act, 1965). Like OSA, the Statistics Act allows the government significant discretion over data accessibility and interpretation, therefore limiting information transparency.

4 Qualitative Evidence

I employ a mixed-methods approach to study data transparency in electoral autocracies, combining extensive fieldwork, interviews, and parliamentary data to test my theory. Over six months of fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital, from February to July 2023, I conducted

21 interviews with journalists, researchers, academics, open data activists, and bureaucrats. These are stakeholders who are invested in and familiar with Malaysia's data landscape. Many were involved with governmental open data initiatives and/or the movement for a RTI law. While conducting these interviews, I took care to clarify with the respondents if they were referring to the pre- or post-2018 period. During interviews, I clarified with respondents whether they referred to the pre- or post-2018 period. Using a snowball sampling approach, I contacted participants through email or WhatsApp, both common channels of business communication in Malaysia. As my informants included prominent civil society members and individuals whose livelihood relied on the regime, I ensured their anonymity by taking detailed handwritten notes instead of recording the interviews. The Appendix provides further information about these interviews.

Managing Public Perception – Suggestion

My interviews revealed that the autocratic BN regime managed public perception of useful information for two reasons: projecting competent governance and controlling race-related narratives. First, the regime aimed to project an image of competence. Interviewee Y explained that the government preferred limited transparency so that when their proposed narratives were questioned, they could claim that challengers lacked the full picture while the government's interpretation, backed by full information, was the correct one. Interviewee S observed that the belief in the government's authority to decide what information best serves public interest remains ingrained in Malaysian society, enabling the regime to retain tight control over data access and interpretation. Interviewee T also suggested that applying for information through an RTI request could alert the government to existing interest in specific data. This could prompt the regime to collect or process the information in ways that support regime narratives. T added that the fear of

public scrutiny influences regime decisions on releasing or withholding data, highlighting regime sensitivity and desire to shape public perception on specific data.

Second, BN sought to manage public perception of race relations, which underpinned its legitimacy. Interviewee R linked the regime's fear of sharing data to the 1969 communal violence. The regime believed that racial harmony is maintained by a delicate equilibrium and is careful about jeopardizing it. R explained that the regime believed that the public would jump to conclusions and disturb the equilibrium if allowed to view certain data. Interviewee A also noted that that data on race and religion were difficult to obtain from government repositories but accessible if asked for through parliamentary questions. This discrepancy indicates that data inaccessibility is a result of regime gatekeeping rather than official policy. R's and A's comments highlight the regime's need to shape public understanding of race relations by controlling access to and interpretation of race data. The regime's need for perception management was so pervasive that even organizations collaborating with them followed this norm. R noted that if they were using government-provided data in their reports, they would often share the analyses and findings with officials before publication so that the latter "can be prepared for anything that might come out."

Limiting Public Knowledge – Suppression

My interviews indicate that Malaysia's autocratic regime sought to limit public knowledge of threatening information. Several interviewees described a "strong culture of secrecy" in data governance. Interviewee T reported that while much of the government's data were non-political, some were withheld to hide years of government mismanagement, incompetence, and corruption. Interviewee Y added that the regime feared open data as it could create transparency and in turn, accountability – "if data is easily accessible, they become easily accountable" (Interview Y, 2023). Similarly, Interviewee K noted that the regime resisted implementing an RTI partly because easy

access to data would expose corruption and allow people to question the regime's governance using data. Furthermore, R contended the regime withheld even simple administrative data because "there are skeletons in the closet that they need to hide." Y also stated that the government feared making "Islam look bad," particularly with data on child sexual assault and marriage. Y added that the Ministry for Women and Welfare used to release data on child sexual assault and marriages, but ended the data sharing abruptly after 2018. These insights reflect the Malaysian autocracy's awareness of the dangers of threatening information and efforts to prevent public knowledge of such information through data suppression.

Illustrating the regime's use of OSA to suppress threatening information, K stated that during a period of severe air pollution, the government classified the air pollution index under OSA. Similarly, when toll rates rose 15 years ago and political cronies were suspected to have benefitted through concession, the regime placed the concession agreements under OSA following public outcry for the release of the agreements. Y corroborated that information on procurement contracts, toll agreements, and corruption records were difficult to obtain, with many ministerial procurement decisions kept off the books. These examples underscore the regime's efforts to prevent public knowledge of threatening information that could diminish their authority by exposing mismanagement and corruption.

Post-2018

My interview data reveals a brief increase in data transparency in Malaysia after democratization, followed by renewed opacity. R mentioned that the PH government, elected on a reform and transparency platform after the 1MDB scandal, initially pushed for greater accountability, including a stronger commitment to RTI and restructuring data governance. S observed a significant interest in an RTI law when PH first took power, but this was short-lived.

Y noted that after party-hopping led to the new government's collapse shortly after 2018,² officials again became more cautious about data accessibility. R also opined that while the PH manifesto promised to prioritize open data, fulfilling this promise was difficult; many in the PH-BN coalition had been in power before, thus it was against their interests to promote data transparency, which could expose past misdeeds. S added that Malaysia's deep-seated culture of secrecy persisted, with a "government-knows-best" mindset prevailing over information disclosure. The need for stable regime transitions, ruling legitimacy and popularity, and a longstanding preference for secrecy drives Malaysia's new government to continue with the information control strategies of their authoritarian predecessors.

5 Quantitative Evidence

Research Design

To test my hypotheses, I use an original dataset of 47000 parliamentary questions submitted to and answered by Malaysia's parliament (*Dewan Rakyat*) between 2008 and 2023. These PQs are written in the Malay language, kept as parliament records, and classified as either 'Oral Questions/Answers' (*Soalan Lisan*) or 'Written Questions/Answers' (*Soalan Bertulis*). Each PQ includes details about the parliamentary sitting, the MP asking the question, their constituency, the addressed minister and ministry, and the question and response itself.

Citizens can submit questions via MPs, or MPs may create questions independently. MPs may request an "Oral Reply" (limited to 10 minutes), otherwise, written replies are included in the Official Report. Each MP can ask up to 3 oral questions per sitting and a total of 10 oral and 5 written questions per House meeting, with oral questions capped at 40 words and limited to a

² Malaysia went through three changes in government in a period of four years after 2018, finally stabilizing with the election of Anwar Ibrahim, from PH, as Prime Minister in 2022.

single topic. The Secretariat may edit submissions, and ministers can refuse to answer questions on grounds of public interest.

I construct my dataset with PQs downloaded from an ‘Open Parliament’ database maintained by Sinar Project, a non-governmental organization focused on open data, and from the Hansard maintained by the Official Portal of the Parliament of Malaysia. I then converted these PDFs to text. After cleaning and processing the data, I obtained a final dataset of 47727 PQ exchanges, of which 32959 are from 2008 to 2018, and 14704 from 2018 to 2023.

I use my PQs to test my hypotheses because, as several interviewees noted, data on sensitive topics that are often inaccessible through other channels can sometimes be found in PQs. Data journalists also consider PQs a valuable resource when other data sources fall short, since ministers are mandated to provide the information requested in PQs.³ Thus, PQs frequently contain information on sensitive issues, making them a rich data source. This forms a hard test of my hypothesis: is there a difference in the number of data points provided by the government on sensitive topics versus non-sensitive topics even in a medium through which such differences should be minimized or neutralized due to the regime’s own institutional rules? Scholars have also used PQs to study how MPs build reputations (Dettman, 2023; Sozzi, 2016), cultivate personal votes (Martin, 2011), respond to electoral vulnerability (Kellermann, 2016), represent minorities (Kolpinskaya, 2017), and address constituency concerns (Russo, 2014). These studies process and employ PQs for text analysis and to extract operationalized variables such as constituency, question content, and MP roles (ruling or opposition) (Dettman, 2023). I follow these conventions to derive similar variables from PQs.

³ Several of my interviewees note that one has to be very specific in asking for the data they want, so that the government will have to provide the data exactly as requested. Otherwise, in response to a vaguely phrased parliamentary question, the government might provide analytically useless aggregated data (Interview K, 2023; Interview Y, 2023; Interview A, 2023).

To test H1, I use Race and Ethnicity as a case study for politically sensitive and useful topic. I operationalize the independent variable, ‘usefulness’, by first identifying relevant keywords in the Malaysian context: “religion” (*agama*), “religion” (*keagamaan*), “races” (*kaum*), “race” (*ras*), “Malay” (*melayu*), “Chinese” (*cina*), “Indian” (*india*), “indigenous” (*Bumiputera*), “indigenous” (*bumi*), “Islam”, “Christian” (*Kristian*), “sultan”, “foreign” (*asing*), “local/indigenous” (*asli*), “FELDA”⁴, “Sabah”, “Sarawak”, “ethnicity” (*etnis*), “ethnic” (*etnik*), and “nation” (*bangsa*). For each PQ, I calculate the proportion of these keywords relative to the total number of words in the question, indicating the extent to which a PQ addresses Race and Ethnicity. The higher the proportion, the more useful the topic asked in the PQ.

To test H2, I use Corruption as an example of a politically sensitive and threatening topic. I operationalize threat level by identifying a cluster of keywords: “IMDB”, “corruption” (*rasuah*), “SPRM”,⁵ “MACC”,⁶ “procurement” (*perolehan*), “corruption” (*korupsi*), “corrupt” (*corrupt*), “collusion” (*kolusi*), “nepotism” (*nepotisme*), “funds” (*dana*), “funding” (*pembiayaan*), “contract” (*kontrak*), “concession” (*konsesi*), “project” (*proyek*). I then calculate the proportion of these keywords for each PQ, measuring the extent to which it addresses Corruption. The higher the proportion, the more threatening the topic of a PQ asked.

I operationalize my outcome variable, ‘information’, by counting the number of data points provided in each Parliamentary Answer (*jawapan*) to a Question (*soalan*). A data point is any numerical value. To ensure accuracy, I removed non-relevant numbers from the Answers column; I removed the years between 1980 and 2022, the term ‘IMDB’ (to avoid counting the

⁴ Malaysia’s Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) is a rural resettlement authority. FELDA settlers are mostly Malays and FELDA wards have traditionally been viewed as ‘vote banks’ for BN (Pakiam, 2018).

⁵ *Suruhanjaya Pencegahan Rasuah Malaysia* (Translation: Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission)

⁶ Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission

‘1’), order sheet numbers, list numbers (for example, 1., 2., 3.), and references to legislative acts (*akta*) and electoral/zoning districts (*seksyen*).

I use a simple linear regression to test the relationship between usefulness, threateningness, and data openness. For each model, I control for whether the MP belongs to the ruling party, and include fixed effects for the Ministry addressed, the MP’s constituency, and the parliamentary sitting. The observable implications of my hypotheses are that the number of data points provided in each Parliamentary Answer will increase with each unit increase in Race and Ethnicity keywords as a proportion of all words in the question. In contrast, the number of data points provided in each Parliamentary Answer will decrease with each unit increase in Corruption keywords as a proportion of all words in the question. I also expect these patterns to hold for H3 and H4. Due to many zero counts in the dataset, I log-transform⁷ the dependent variable, but my results are robust to alternative ways of modeling the dependent variable (see discussion below).

Identification Assumptions

I assume that any increase in data transparency post-democratization is not due to increased state capacity. Although ministries were reformed and ministers changed after PH’s 2018 victory, recruitment and promotion practices within the bureaucracy remain unchanged. Notably, the race-based preferential policy of recruiting *bumiputeras* into the civil service and the resultant predominantly mono-ethnic bureaucracy remains (Gomez et al., 2021; BTI, 2024). This continuity means that state capacity for providing data transparency stays constant post-2018. Furthermore, infrastructure improvements for the bureaucracy existed before democratization, with no significant leap in state capacity since 2018. Therefore, I attribute any

⁷ The outcome is $\ln(y + 1)$, where y is the count of data points in each parliamentary response.

rise in data transparency to political changes brought by democratization (Pepinsky, 2014).). For instance, institutions like the Attorney General’s Chamber, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, Elections Commission, Securities Commission, and the National Bank gained more autonomy after democratization (Gomez et al., 2021). Any increase in state capacity and by extension, data transparency could be seen as a result of these political changes to institutions brought about by democratization.

Second, I assume that any variation in the information released on non-sensitive versus sensitive topics, especially threatening topics, is not due to a lack of data. The Malaysian government likely collects data on sensitive and threatening topics through internal studies, commission reports, surveillance, and other ancillary channels including procurement forms. My interviews confirm this data collection (Interview M, 2023; Interview T; Interview L, 2023). This assumption aligns with the ‘dictator’s dilemma’ literature, which posits that information collection is essential for regimes to maintain control, maximize compliance (Teets 2013; Roberts, 2018; Koesel et al., 2020), and pre-empt elite coups or mass unrest (Greitens, 2016). Hence, I assume that the government possesses data on most sensitive topics, and any difference in the level of information released for distinct topic types is due to the regime’s deliberate regulation of information.

Analysis Results

Table 1: Correlation between Topic Usefulness or Topic Threat and Information Provided, Malaysian Parliament (2008-2018).

	Dependent Variable: Data Points Provided $\ln(y + 1)$	
	(1)	(2)
Intercept	2.02*** (.27)	2.06*** (.71)
Proportion Race and Ethnicity Keywords	2.56*** (.50)	
Proportion Corruption Keywords		-2.30** (1.07)
Ruling Party	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
MP Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes
Ministry FEs	Yes	Yes
Parliamentary Sitting FEs	Yes	Yes
Total Observations	32959	32959

Note: Observations are from June 2008 to April 2018. Fixed effects include whether the MP posing the question was from the ruling party, the MP's constituency, the Ministry that was questioned, and the parliamentary sitting in which the question was posed. Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficient estimates for fixed effects are available upon request.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The results in Table 1 support hypotheses 1 and 2. The government provides more information on politically sensitive but useful topics than on others. Specifically, the expected log count of data points provided by the Malaysian regime in a parliamentary answer increases by 2.56 for each additional proportion of Race and Ethnicity keywords in the parliamentary question asked, significant at the 0.001 level. Conversely, the expected log count of data points in a parliamentary answer decreases by 2.30 for each additional proportion of Corruption keywords in the parliamentary question asked, significant at the 0.01 level. The results indicate that compared to all other topics, the regime offers more information on sensitive but useful

topics and less on threatening ones, consistent with my argument that the regime uses suggestion when addressing useful topics and suppression when discussing threatening ones. Examining the control variables, if the MP is from the ruling party, the expected log count of data points in parliamentary answers decreases by a negligible 0.009 and 0.007 for Race and Ethnicity and Corruption topics, respectively; neither result is statistically significant. Across H1 and H2, coefficients for other fixed effects are also small, insignificant, and show no discernable pattern in their effects on data points counts.

Table 2: Correlation between Topic Usefulness or Topic Threat and Information Provided, Malaysian Parliament (2018-2023).

	Dependent Variable: Data Points Provided $\ln(y + 1)$	
	(1)	(2)
Intercept	1.26*** (0.33)	1.31*** (.33)
Proportion Race and Ethnicity Keywords	1.84** (0.74)	
Proportion Corruption Keywords		-7.34*** (1.47)
Ruling Party	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
MP Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes
Ministry FEs	Yes	Yes
Parliamentary Sitting FEs	Yes	Yes
Total Observations	14704	14704

Note: Observations are from August 2018 to June 2023. Fixed effects include whether the MP posing the question was from the ruling party, the MP's constituency, the Ministry that was questioned, and the parliamentary sitting in which the question was posed. Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficient estimates for fixed effects are available upon request.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The results in Table 2 reveal that the usage of suggestion and suppression not only continues but intensifies for the latter after democratization. Post-2018, the expected log count of data points provided by the Malaysian democratic regime in a parliamentary answer increases by 1.84 for each increase in proportion of Race and Ethnicity keywords in a parliamentary question, significant at the 0.01 level. Similarly, each additional proportion of Corruption keywords in a parliamentary question results in a 7.34 decrease in the log count of data points in a parliamentary answer, significant at the 0.001 level. The democratic PH government withheld even more information on politically threatening topics than the autocratic BN government. The results for ruling party are small and insignificant. However, unlike the authoritarian period, questions from MPs in PH's ruling party are associated with a small increase of 0.02 in the expected log count of data points in answers for both Race and Ethnicity and Corruption. Results for other fixed effects remain small, insignificant, and without clear patterns for H3 and H4.

Table 3: Correlation between Democratization, Topic Usefulness or Threat, and Information Provided, Malaysian Parliament (2008-2023).

	Dependent Variable: Data Points Provided $\ln(y + 1)$	
	(1)	(2)
Intercept	2.12*** (.01)	2.13*** (.01)
Proportion Race and Ethnicity Keywords	1.75*** (.39)	
Proportion Corruption Keywords		-3.87*** (0.86)
Years from Democratization	0.006*** (.0006)	0.006*** (.0006)
Democratized	0.17*** (.03)	0.17*** (.03)
Years from Democratization*Democratized	-0.033*** (.003)	-0.032*** (.003)
Total Observations	47727	47727

Note: Observations are from June 2008 to June 2023. Predictors include the year in which the question was posed as a count of the number of years before or after 2018, whether the year was before (2008 to 2017) or after (2018 to 2023) Malaysia’s democratization, and an interaction of the previous two variables. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

I further validate my findings using an event study model to assess the impact of democratization on the number of data points provided by the Malaysian government. From 2008 to 2023, the expected log count of data points provided by the Malaysian government increases by 1.75 with each unit increase in Race and Ethnicity keywords in a parliamentary question, while it decreases by 3.87 for Corruption-related questions. This finding, significant at the 0.001 level, confirms that of the previous models that the Malaysian regime employs suggestion and suppression across all time periods, providing more data for useful topics and less for threatening ones.

Furthermore, across years, more data is provided under autocracy and less under democracy. Each additional year under autocracy is associated with a 0.006 increase in the log count of data points for both topics, while each additional year under democracy is associated with a 0.027 and 0.026 decrease for Race and Ethnicity and Corruption, respectively. Additionally, there was a brief improvement in data openness at the start of democratization; in 2018, the expected log count of data points provided for both topics was 0.17 more than the previous year. That is, data openness improved under autocracy and experienced a brief boost with democratization, though it declined in the following democratic years.

A closer look at specific PQs provides further insight into the regime's use of suggestion and suppression. In a session on November 13, 2014, an MP from Penang asked the Minister of Home Affairs for Gini Coefficients for all states, spliced by *Bumiputera* Malays and *Bumiputera* non-Malays, gender, and rural/urban status. Although the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) provided most of the data, they aggregated ethnicity into *Bumiputera* versus non-*Bumiputera* instead. They argued that this categorization of ethnicity is more appropriate, citing statistical confidence intervals and noting that over 80 percent of *Bumiputera* are Malay. This use of suggestion allowed the regime to appear responsive when asked a question on the sensitive but useful issue of income divide between races, while simultaneously masking racial disparities by asserting their own aggregated categorization. It supplies more data based on this less nuanced categorization to project competence and preempt public discourses with negative valences, which a more accurate measure of ethnicity might trigger.

In the same session, an MP from Perak asked Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission about the total number of corruption cases investigated and convicted that involved bribes under 1000 Malaysian Ringgit. The PMO responded that the Commission cannot disclose data, as

corruption cases are measured by more than just their monetary values. They stated that even small bribes can create huge impacts like threats to national security and community wellbeing. By using suppression, the Malaysian government not only provided no data in their response, but also justified suppression by shifting the focus from transparency to security. Full exchanges can be found in the Appendix.

Robustness Checks

I include two robustness checks. First, I ran a negative binomial model using the untransformed count of data points as the outcome,⁸ with the same independent variables and fixed effects as in the main models (Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix). The coefficients remained in the expected direction and were highly significant at the 0.001 level. Second, I analyzed the independent variables as binary, coding PQs with any Race and Ethnicity or Corruption keyword as 1 and other as 0. Again, the coefficients were in the expected direction and highly significant, except for H2, where suppression under autocracy was insignificant (Tables 3 and 4 in Appendix). In both checks, suppression was stronger under democracy than autocracy. Full results are in the Appendix.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This manuscript investigated how authoritarian regimes control information flow under increased data transparency, a necessity for economic growth in a post-industrial economy. I argue that autocracies focus on managing information and data around politically sensitive topics, allowing non-sensitive data to circulate to aid economic development. For sensitive topics, regimes distinguish between politically useful and politically threatening issues, adapting control strategies accordingly: they use suggestion to shape public perception on useful topics

⁸ Specifically, my outcome variable is coded as $(y + 1)$ so that the zero counts will not be dropped from the regression.

and suppression to restrict knowledge on threatening ones. My findings demonstrate that Malaysia's electoral authoritarian regime provides more data on politically useful topics, but only data that supports the regime's narrative. Meanwhile, they provide less data on politically threatening topics to avoid exposing governmental mismanagement, which are difficult to reframe positively.

These findings further our understanding of how autocrats manage information and data transparency. While autocrats increasingly choose propaganda over blunt censorship, I demonstrate that effective control still requires both strategies, as information usually carries both utility and risk. Authoritarian regimes therefore tailor their strategies: propaganda for useful topics and censorship for threatening ones. This manuscript contributes to the literature on information control by categorizing information into two distinct subtypes and highlighting the importance of recognizing variation in information types when analyzing control strategies. I also extend the concept of information control to data and introduce two key strategies – suggestion and suppression – in the autocrat's toolkit.

I also show that Malaysia's new democratic regime continues to control information through suggestion and suppression, and intensified their usage of suppression. Moreover, data openness is worsening across time under Malaysia's democracy. These results have implications for our understanding of democracy: while democratic transitions involve a peaceful transfer in power (Przeworski, 1999), substantive freedoms that enable citizens' full participation and contestation do not emerge immediately (Dahl, 1971). However, this does not mean that democracy fails to advance citizens' rights and freedoms. Indeed, Malaysia has made significant progress in data transparency and freedom of information since 2018.⁹

⁹ For example, two states have already implemented state-level RTI laws. The government has also improved their open data websites with added accessibility and transparency features.

Despite steps towards openness, data transparency and freedom of information in Malaysia's democratic era remain contingent on ministerial priorities and strong political will (Interview R, 2023; Interview K, 2023; Interview S, 2023; Interview E, 2023; Interview B, 2023). Pressing needs in the early stages of democratic consolidation, including the maintenance of alliances and public confidence, may have reduced the political will to institutionalize freedom of information. A new democratic regime might prioritize suggestion and suppression over transparency to stabilize their rule amidst shifting political terrain. My findings support these hypotheses.

While I focus on Malaysia, these findings extend to other post-industrialized autocracies like China, Singapore, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Hungary, and Turkey. These upper-middle and high-income autocracies likely face similar tensions between economic growth and political stability in regulating data flow. The dynamics of suggestion and suppression in parliamentary contexts apply directly to other electoral autocracies. However, even non-electoral autocracies like China and Qatar manage information through speeches, press releases, reports, and open data portals. The politics of information flow discussed here are broadly relevant across post-industrial autocracies.

Future research could examine additional strategies authoritarian regimes use to manage data openness. For example, how do autocrats respond once threatening information is already exposed? Second, the investigation of how autocrats achieve growth without political liberalization can be extended to other digital governance initiatives, such as Personal Data Protection Acts, e-government feedback channels, and blockchain initiatives. Future research can explore how autocrats regulate civil liberties in other sectors of the post-industrial economy to balance economic growth with political imperatives.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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Robustness Checks

Table 1: Correlation between Topic Usefulness or Topic Threat and Information Provided, Malaysian Parliament, with Negative Binomial Regression (2008-2018).

	Dependent Variable: Data Points Provided ($y + 1$)	
	(1)	(2)
Intercept	2.24*** (.33)	2.27*** (.33)
Proportion Race and Ethnicity Keywords	1.80** (.64)	
Proportion Corruption Keywords		-8.99*** (1.28)
Ruling Party	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)
MP Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes
Ministry FEs	Yes	Yes
Parliamentary Sitting FEs	Yes	Yes
Total Observations	32959	32959

Note: Observations are from June 2008 to April 2018. Fixed effects include whether the MP posing the question was from the ruling party, the MP's constituency, the Ministry that was questioned, and the parliamentary sitting in which the question was posed. Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficient estimates for fixed effects are available upon request. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2: Correlation between Topic Usefulness or Topic Threat and Information Provided, Malaysian Parliament, with Negative Binomial Regression (2018-2023).

	Dependent Variable: Data Points Provided ($y + 1$)	
	(1)	(2)
Intercept	1.87*** (.38)	1.92*** (.38)
Race and Ethnicity Keywords	3.06*** (.86)	
Corruption Keywords		-12.77*** (1.62)
Ruling Party	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)
MP Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes
Ministry FEs	Yes	Yes
Parliamentary Sitting FEs	Yes	Yes
Total Observations	14704	14704

Note: Observations are from August 2018 to June 2023. Fixed effects include whether the MP posing the question was from the ruling party, the MP's constituency, the Ministry that was questioned, and the parliamentary sitting in which the question was posed. Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficient estimates for fixed effects are available upon request.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3: Correlation between Topic Usefulness or Topic Threat and Information Provided, Malaysian Parliament, using Binary Independent Variable (2008-2018).

	Dependent Variable: Data Points Provided $\ln(y + 1)$	
	(1)	(2)
Intercept	1.98*** (.27)	2.06*** (.27)
Race and Ethnicity Keywords	0.08** (.02)	
Corruption Keywords		-0.04 (.04)
Ruling Party	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
MP Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes
Ministry FEs	Yes	Yes
Parliamentary Sitting FEs	Yes	Yes
Total Observations	32959	32959

Note: Observations are from June 2008 to April 2018. Fixed effects include whether the MP posing the question was from the ruling party, the MP's constituency, the Ministry that was questioned, and the parliamentary sitting in which the question was posed. Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficient estimates for fixed effects are available upon request. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4: Correlation between Topic Usefulness or Topic Threat and Information Provided, Malaysian Parliament, using Binary Independent Variable (2018-2023).

	Dependent Variable: Data Points Provided ln(y + 1)	
	(1)	(2)
Intercept	1.24*** (.33)	1.31*** (.33)
Race and Ethnicity Keywords	0.07** (.02)	
Corruption Keywords		-0.21*** (.04)
Ruling Party	0.02 (.03)	0.02 (.03)
MP Constituency FEs	Yes	Yes
Ministry FEs	Yes	Yes
Parliamentary Sitting FEs	Yes	Yes
Total Observations	14704	14704

Note: Observations are from August 2018 to June 2023. Fixed effects include whether the MP posing the question was from the ruling party, the MP's constituency, the Ministry that was questioned, and the parliamentary sitting in which the question was posed. Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficient estimates for fixed effects are available upon request.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Interview Appendix

Category	Interviewee	Date of Interview	Source	Format	Alias in Manuscript	Main Expertise
Civil Society	IO director	27-Feb-23	Cold email	Zoom	Interview M	General
	Data journalist 1	5-Mar-23	Referred to by Singaporean journalist	in-person	Interview K	Data
	Civil society activist, data user 1	7-Mar-23	Mentioned by advisor, cold emailed	Zoom	Interview D	Data
	Think tank researcher 1	8-Mar-23	Met at civil society event	in-person	Interview E	Data
	Data journalist 2	17-Mar-23	Referred to by data journalist 1	Zoom	Interview L	Data
	IO researcher 1	20-Mar-23	Referred to by IO director	Zoom	Interview B	PDPA
	Think tank researcher 2	22-Mar-23	Referred to by think tank researcher 1	in-person	Interview J	PDPA
	IO researcher 2	22-Mar-23	Referred to by IO director	In-person	Interview O	PDPA
	Think tank researcher 3	24-Mar-23	Referred to by think tank researcher 1	Zoom	Interview F	Cybersecurity, PDPA
	Civil society activist, data user 2	24-Mar-23	Referred to by data journalist 1	in-person	Interview Y	Data

	Think tank researcher 4	10-May-23	Referred to by think tank director	in-person	Interview J	Data, PDPA
	Civil society activist, data user 3	29-Mar-23	Referred to by think tank researcher 1	in-person	Interview H	Data
	Journalist	4-Apr-23	Referred to by data journalist 1	Zoom	Interview A	Data
	Civil society activist 1	12-Apr-23	Referred to by civil society activist, data user 2	Zoom	Interview K	PDPA
	Think tank researcher 5	19-Apr-23	Cold email	in-person	Interview R	Data, PDPA
	Think tank researcher 6	21-Mar-23	Referred to by ex-think tank researcher	Zoom	Interview V	Data
	Civil society activist 2	5-May-23	Referred to by civil society activist, data user 2	Zoom	Interview S	Data
Public Sector	Civil servant in Department of Statistics	2-Apr-23	Cold email	Zoom	Interview T	Data
	Ex-civil servant in MAMPU	14-Apr-23	Referred to by leading data journalist	Zoom	Interview M	Data
	Civil servant in MDEC	18-May-23	Referred to by think tank director	Zoom	Interview C	General
Private Sector	Consultant with PwC	16-May-23	Referred to by civil servant 2	in-person	Interview P	General

Parliamentary Question: Race and Ethnicity Example

NO. SOALAN: 203

PEMBERITAHUAN PERTANYAAN DEWAN RAKYAT

PERTANYAAN : BUKAN LISAN

DARIPADA : YB SIM CHEE KEONG [BUKIT MERTAJAM]

SOALAN :

Tuan Sim Chee Keong [Bukit Mertajam] minta **PERDANA MENTERI** menyatakan indeks Gini Coefficient mengikut kaum di mana Bumiputera dipecahkan kepada Melayu dan Bumiputera Bukan Melayu, jantina, bandar dan kampung, dan di setiap negeri

JAWAPAN: YB SENATOR DATO' SRI ABDUL WAHID OMAR,

MENTERI DI JABATAN PERDANA MENTERI

Untuk makluman Ahli Yang Berhormat, indeks Gini Coefficient mengikut kaum, jantina, bandar dan luar bandar di setiap negeri adalah seperti di Jadual 1. Maklumat berkaitan etnik adalah lebih sesuai dibahagikan berdasarkan etnik utama (Bumiputera dan bukan Bumiputera) berdasarkan 95 peratus aras keyakinan Penyiasatan Pendapatan Isi Rumah (PPIR) dan lebih 80 peratus daripada Bumiputera adalah Melayu.

Jadual 1: Pekali Gini berdasarkan Negeri, Etnik, Strata dan Jantina, 2012

Negeri	Etnik		Strata		Jantina		Jumlah
	Bumiputera	Bukan Bumiputera	Bandar	Luar Bandar	Lelaki	Perempuan	
Johor	0.360	0.394	0.375	0.380	0.374	0.417	0.383
Kedah	0.395	0.369	0.391	0.336	0.383	0.412	0.391
Kelantan	0.410	0.392	0.416	0.385	0.404	0.422	0.410
Melaka	0.340	0.377	0.359	0.312	0.346	0.365	0.355
N.Sembilan	0.355	0.418	0.390	0.350	0.371	0.398	0.382
Pahang	0.346	0.376	0.370	0.301	0.349	0.339	0.354
P.Pinang	0.371	0.363	0.365	0.371	0.358	0.404	0.370
Perak	0.424	0.408	0.409	0.405	0.405	0.412	0.417
Perlis	0.454	0.455	0.466	0.403	0.446	0.433	0.455
Selangor	0.395	0.394	0.390	0.354	0.390	0.418	0.396
Terengganu	0.425	0.419	0.433	0.385	0.412	0.469	0.426
Sabah	0.421	0.403	0.413	0.406	0.423	0.439	0.427
Sarawak	0.431	0.413	0.414	0.384	0.436	0.425	0.440
W.P.Kuala Lumpur	0.387	0.463	0.442	-	0.445	0.408	0.442
W.P. Labuan	0.389	0.319	0.368	0.423	0.379	0.387	0.383
W.P Putrajaya	0.304	0.301	0.305	-	0.297	0.301	0.305
MALAYSIA	0.421	0.429	0.417	0.382	0.423	0.449	0.431

Sumber: Penyiasatan Pendapatan Isi Rumah 2012, Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia

Sekian, terima kasih.

Parliamentary Question: Corruption Example

NO. SOALAN: 30

PEMBERITAHUAN PERTANYAAN DEWAN RAKYAT

PERTANYAAN : LISAN

DARIPADA : DR. KO CHUNG SEN [KAMPAR]

TARIKH : 13.10.2014 (ISNIN)

SOALAN :

Dr. Ko Chung Sen [Kampar] minta **PERDANA MENTERI** menyatakan bilangan kes rasuah disiasat dan disabitkan oleh SPRM dalam tempoh lima tahun lepas yang melibatkan rasuah wang kurang daripada RM1000.

JAWAPAN: YB SENATOR DATUK PAUL LOW SENG KUAN
MENTERI DI JABATAN PERDANA MENTERI

Tuan Yang di-Pertua,

SPRM tidak dapat memperincikan kes-kes siasatan rasuah mengikut jumlah nilai rasuah. Ini kerana kes rasuah tidak semestinya melibatkan nilai wang semata-mata tetapi melibatkan perkhidmatan, penyalahgunaan kuasa, penyelewengan dan kes-kes bersindiket.

Untuk makluman Yang Berhormat juga, walaupun seseorang pelaku rasuah menerima nilai amaun rasuah yang kecil, namun impak buruk dari hasil perlakuan rasuah tersebut boleh menjurus kepada ancaman keselamatan negara, kesejahteraan masyarakat dan ekonomi terutamanya melibatkan kehilangan hasil negara berjumlah jutaan hingga berbillion ringgit.

Sekian, terima kasih.