

Against Totalitarianism: The Value of a History Education in Countering Extremist Ideology (co-authored with Luca Braghieri)

Abstract: How can democratic societies foster support for democratic institutions and inoculate citizens against authoritarian ideologies from the extremes of the political spectrum? We study whether history education about past authoritarian regimes serves this purpose successfully. To do so, we exploit an education reform in a large German state mandating that the topics covered in the last two years of the high school history curriculum rotate exogenously across graduating cohorts. As a result of this natural experiment, some cohorts only covered the far-left socialist regime of East Germany, whereas others only covered the far-right fascist regime of Nazi Germany. Surveying more than 1,700 former students a decade after graduation, we find that learning about East Germany relative to Nazi Germany increases knowledge of East German history and decreases support for extreme left-wing ideology. Attitudes towards extreme right-wing ideology are largely unaffected, consistent with high baseline levels of awareness about the pitfalls of far-right ideology in Germany.