

# Differences in degree or differences in kind? Re-conceptualizing State Repression

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## Abstract

Cross-national studies of physical integrity violations generally conceptualize state repression as a scalar phenomenon where the same drivers are important for all levels of repression (i.e., differences in degree). This assumption has led to theorizing, measurement, modeling, and findings that confirm this view. We challenge the scalar assumption and conceptualize repression instead as a discrete level phenomenon where different variables impact distinct levels of repression (i.e., differences in kind). By estimating a canonical model from the state repression literature using Random Forests classifiers, we find that key conclusions based on the scalar assumption are deceptive, and that theorizing and modeling repression as discrete levels can improve our understanding. Specifically, we demonstrate that no independent variable consistently predicts outcomes across the standard repression measure of the Political Terror Scale (PTS) and some variables are extremely important for particular levels. We conclude that researchers should consider modeling repression by discretizing human rights outcomes.

## Scalar Paradigm

- Cross-national studies typically conceptualize state repression as a *scalar phenomenon*

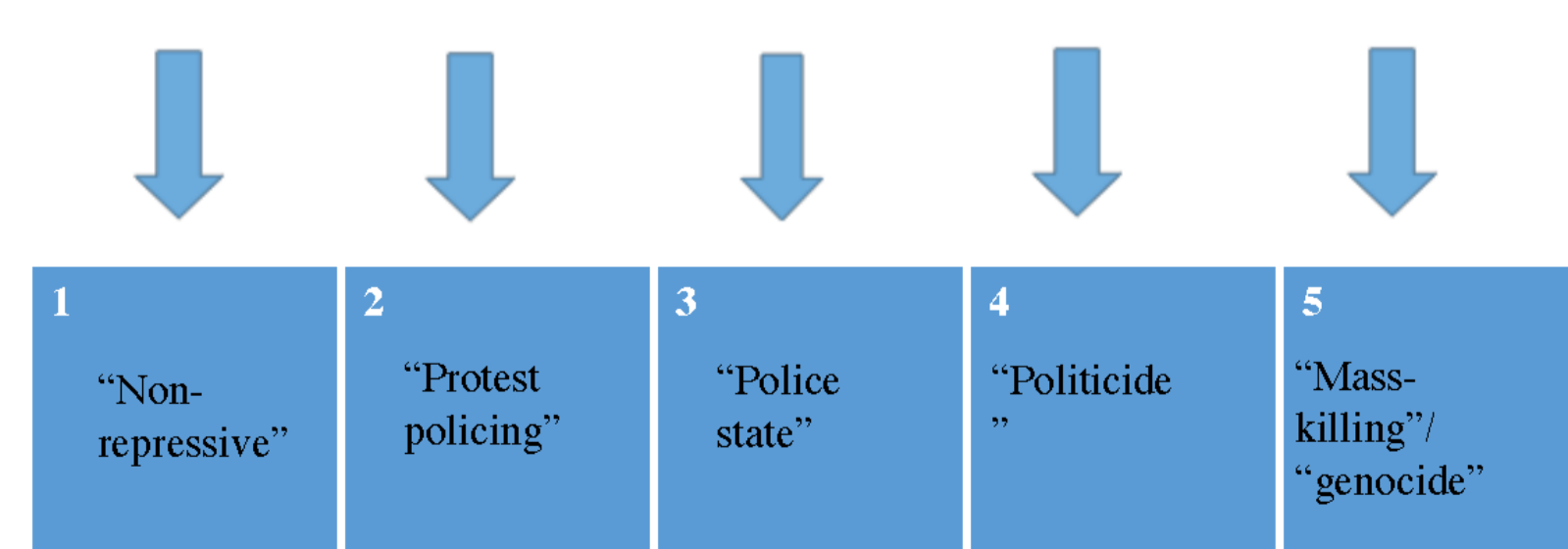
Types/levels Variables	1	2	3	4	5
A	■				
B	■	■			
C	■	■	■		
D	■	■	■	■	
E	■	■	■	■	■

- Informs theorizing, measurement, modeling, and findings
  - Potentially leads to ineffective policies

## Discrete Approach

- State repression might approximate **differences in kind** more than **differences in degree**
- Should not default to thinking of repression as a scalar phenomenon
  - Different factors might vary in the extent to which they predict different levels (e.g., PTS 1, PTS 5)
- Questionable presumption of equitable consideration
  - Seems implausible that all variables we consider should be equally relevant to decision-makers across all repression levels

## Differences in Kind



- Different literatures, different theories for these levels and forms
- Different underlying dimensions (lethality, targeting)
- Study repertoires or patterns?

## Different Patterns of Discreteness

Types/levels Variables	1	2	3	4	5
A	■				
B		■			
C			■		
D				■	
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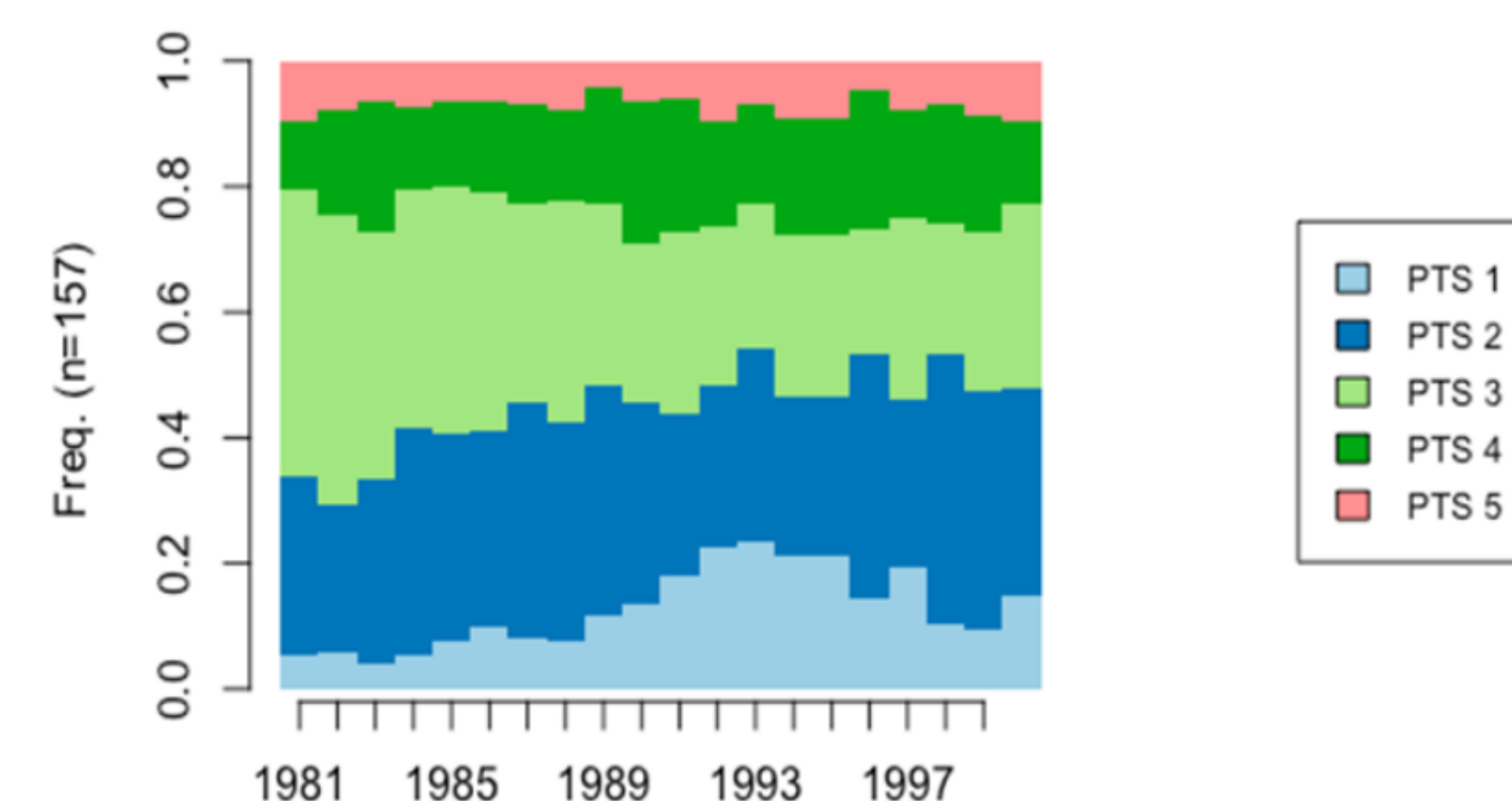
Types/levels Variables	1	2	3	4	5
A	■				
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D	■	■	■	■	
E	■	■	■	■	■

Types/levels Variables	1	2	3	4	5
A	■			■	
B	■		■	■	
C		■		■	■
D		■	■		■
E		■	■	■	■

Types/levels Variables	1	2	3	4	5
A	■	■	■	■	■
B	■	■	■	■	■
C			■	■	
D			■		■
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## Research Design

- Data: 2, 224 country-year observations covering 157 countries from 1981 – 1999
- Response variable: PTS measure transformed into five discrete indicators



- Predictors: The set of measures used in the 'standard model' of state respect for human rights
- Estimator: Random Forests classifiers
  - Provides measure of variable importance
  - No strong theoretical priors about functional form of predictors

## Results

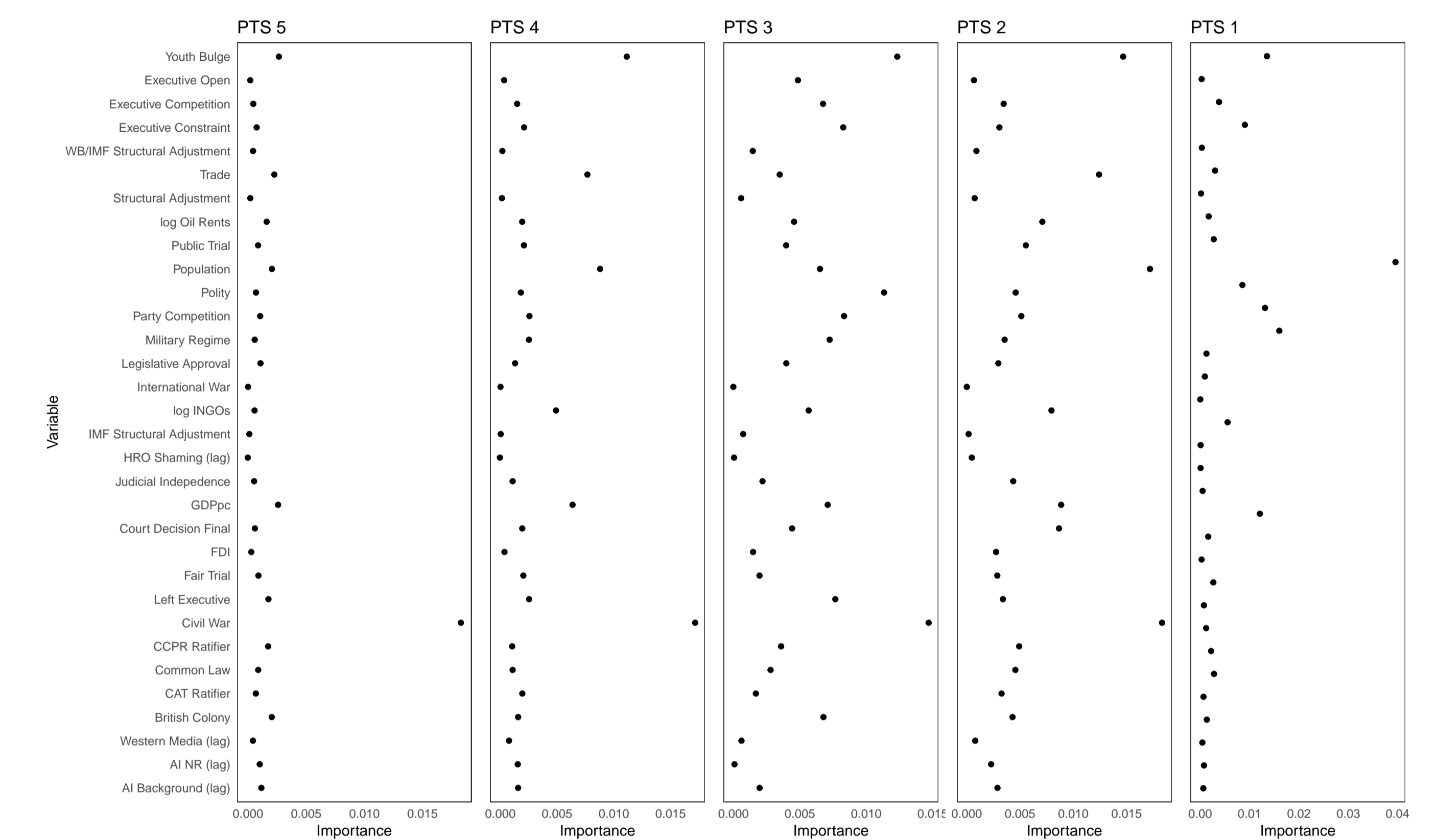


Figure 1: This plot displays the results of five Random Forests classifiers. The outcome for each is a binary indicator that equals '1' for a specific PTS outcome and '0' otherwise. The vertical axis in each panel displays the variables in the model. The horizontal axis displays estimates of permutation accuracy for each variable.

- Relative importance of variables changes across models
- This means that some variables do more to explain some outcomes than others
- No variable predicts well across outcomes
- These findings all speak *against* the scalar assumption

## Summary

- Theoretically and empirically challenge how cross-national literature has conceptualized repression
- Scalar assumption can lead to incorrect conclusions and bad policy recommendations
- Empirical results undermine scalar assumptions
- Future work should theorize about repression as potentially discrete outcomes